

**A BYGONE
OXFORD**

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A bygone Oxford by Francis Goldie

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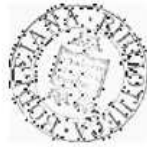
FRANCIS GOLDIE

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A BYGONE OXFORD.

BY

FRANCIS GOLDIE, S.J.



73

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1881.

*Gough Adds Oxon
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"BYGONE OXFORD" was read during the Easter term as a lecture before a Society in Oxford, and at the request of the audience afterwards appeared in the September number of the MONTH. In consequence of the subject being originally prepared for a lecture, the author neglected to note down his authorities. It has since been carefully revised and in part re-written. But it was then too late to give the various references. The sources were chiefly Peshall, Anthony à Wood, whose *M.S. Collectanea* proved of great value, Brewer's *Monumenta Franciscana*, the *Bibliotheca Carmelitana*, Ossinger's (Joannes Felix) *Bibliotheca Augustiniana, historica, critica et chronologica*, Echard's *Scriptores Dominicani*, Wadding's *Annales*, and Dugdale's *Monasticon*.

The author must make special acknowledgment to Canon Bright, and to Mr. Parker, jun., for some valuable corrections which they kindly suggested.

Oxford, 1880.

A Bygone Oxford.

It was a close, dull day in the end of June. The Bodleian was almost deserted. A solitary German student was working hard in one of the compartments. The officials were quiet at their posts. The few strangers who passed lazily along the show cases of the Bodleian proper seemed awed with the *genius loci*, and did not dare to break in upon its silence. I was seated in a corner of the Selden Library, one of Dugdale's charming folios before me, wading through the chartulary of an Oxford abbey. The slight rustle of the leaves in Exeter College Garden heard through the open casement, faint bursts of soft music from the organ in the Sheldonian were the only sounds that reached me, as struggling with sleep I tried to finish the long list of donations in the charter before me.

I was on the Thames, broad and bright, the trees on its banks in their fullest glory. The meadows were crowned with long rich grass. The cattle on the pastures were browsing in the shade. The boat was a strange craft, not made by Clasper; but the boatman was stranger, and his language strangest of all. It was with difficulty I could understand what seemed a very intensified *patois* of Oxford countryfolk. I was aware that I was on my way from Abingdon with letters commendatory from the Lord Abbot to the Abbot of Osney and to the heads of other religious houses of Oxford. Iffley was passed, and the long pastures of ~~Horspath~~ ^{Crowley}, though we had been stayed at more than one lock and paid more than one toll with sundry mutterings of the boatman at the greed of churchmen who, so he seemed to think, had made those locks simply to lighten his purse. And now the city walls of Oxford came in sight with a cluster of many towers and spires rising over them and around them. We caught a glimpse of Corpus Christi College shining brightly in its newness, by its elder sister of Merton, beneath the graceful spire of St. Frideswide's. The boat shoots at last under the arches of the Great Bridge. It is crowned by

a lofty gateway, to which my boatman points and straightway crosses himself, as he mutters the name of the great wizard friar who used from that vantage point to search for answers amidst the stars. He doffs his cap to St. Nicholas' Chapel, where dwelt the hermit, so called, the custodian of the bridge.

And now there comes in view a sight quite unfamiliar. Grey enclosure walls coming down to the waterside girdle in a vast religious house, over which towers a stately church. Beyond it and confused with it is another group of buildings, out of which rises another church not less sumptuous, to which the many towers of the castle serve as a background. Across park-like meadows, bosky gardens, and long avenues, surrounded on both sides by broad streams, the Monarch of the Scene is a cathedral-looking church. As it is due north, it stands up against the sky a vast pile some three hundred and fifty feet in length; one lofty and massive tower at its west end, another but smaller at the intersection of the transepts and nave. Now the boat rounds the promontory on which stands the nearest religious house, and while the neighbouring group of buildings and the great church opposite, with the abbey at its feet, become more visible, another abbey comes in sight, further on in front, and only less stately than those nearer hand. And as we pass beneath antique bridges and near foaming mill-races, two other monastic buildings are seen, behind and beyond the great castle, but still outside the city walls,—one a picturesque group of various roofs, out of which rises a noble chapel, with pleasant gardens stretching to the waterside; the other towering over it with a half palatial look, with a church and spire, from whose tower rang out a merry peal of bells.—It was an Oxford, but not the Oxford that I know. The gas-works, the dreary streets that run down to the Isis, the big breweries, the unsightly railway stations, and their still more unsightly sidings, that now are, were not. It was a vision of Oxford as it was before the spoiler had gone forth, before the Friars Minor and Friar Preachers, before the monks of Osney and of Rewley had been driven out and their houses of prayer and study levelled to the ground, before the Religious of Mount Carmel had been forced to give up to Henry the Eighth the palace which his ancestor had dedicated to God.

The big bell of Bodley boomed, swinging leisurely on its wheel. I lifted up my head from the open pages of Dugdale on which it had fallen. A vision of beauty was gone. I could

only grope for the dead bones from which it had sprung and strive again laboriously to reconstruct by further study the fair dream I had dreamt that day. And to come down to a matter-of-fact world, it is hard to realize that this is no dream, but a feeble presentment of an historic past.

The visitor to Rome, however slightly acquainted he may be with its past history, is constantly confronted by ruins which tell him that the city of to-day is built over another city grander and greater as earthly things go. The visitor to Oxford feels at once that he is in an old world city, whose very streets and domestic buildings seem of a distant past. Magdalen and New, and the great quadrangle of Christ Church, by contrast with our manufacturing towns of yesterday, tell of a period so distant that one never imagines that buildings—perhaps greater and grander still—existed before these Colleges were thought of. And yet a little investigation will prove this to have been the case. May I offer myself as a guide, not because I know much, but because I have learned enough to regret that more is not known, and with the hope that others more fitted will fill in the study I venture roughly to sketch?

ST. FRIDESWIDE'S.

One monastic building yet remains to Oxford, if not in its entirety, yet sufficiently perfect to give some notion of what we have lost by the greed of Henry the Eighth and the zeal of his reforming, but not unselfish, abettors. The building remains, but carefully stripped, under three reigns, of all that art and self-sacrifice had done to make glorious the house of God. And fortunately, for it was owing to no special reverence on the part of its preservers, this building, which was spared in the general wrecking, was the most venerable and the most venerated of all its peers. Familiar to every one who has seen Oxford is the Early English spire of Christ Church, rising out of the noble buildings of Wolsey's College. How many remember that this spire marks out the sanctuary which was the nucleus around which City and University gathered! In the troubled days of the Saxon period, somewhere in the eighth century a subregulus, a petty king of some sort, was ruler in Oxford. Tradition calls him Didanus, which Dr. Ingram boldly translates into Æthelbald, the powerful King of the Mercians. But I fear Æthelbald might stand better for Algarus, the villain

of the story.¹ The wife of Didanus, the Lady Safrida, bore him a daughter so given to a life of prayer and penance, that when Safrida died—in 727 (?)—he built a church and convent for his gentle Frideswide. Into its enclosure she retired with twelve companions. A Prince Algarus had lost his heart to the holy maiden, and in his lust and power despised her solemn vows to God, and would have carried her away by force. With but two companions she dropped secretly down the river to Bendon or Abingdon, some ten miles off, where the seedling of the great abbey had lately been planted. There St. Frideswide lay concealed in an outhouse bowered with ivy. The tyrant, balked of his prey, threatened to destroy Oxford unless he were told where she lay hid. But close by the North Gate, near St. Michael's Church of to-day, he was stricken with sudden blindness. Some say that he went home unrepentant and blind. Others that he straightway asked God for his sight for St. Frideswide's sake, and it was restored to him. Nor till Henry the Third's time did any monarch after that dare to enter her church. Three years later our Saint returned to Oxford. But she sought for a deeper solitude in the marshes of Binsey, and in the quiet of the streamlet-girdled woods of a semi-island she built herself an oratory. At her prayers a well gushed up at the west end of the church. It is still known as St. Margaret's, and became so famous for its healing powers that a large village with twenty-four inns was built hard by, of which no vestige now remains. After her death, on the 19th of October, *circa* 740, St. Frideswide's body was buried in the convent church at Oxford, which changed its name from St. Mary's to St. Frideswide's, and our Saint became the Patroness of the town. Her festival was kept on the anniversary of her death, and was celebrated most solemnly.

In the hideous massacre of the Danes planned by Æthelred the Unready, the fugitives from Oxford took shelter in the tower of St. Frideswide's Church, and as the place could not be taken by storm, fire was put to the building—it was probably built of wood—and it was utterly destroyed. The royal murderer—let us hope—repented of his crime, as useless as it was vile, and not only rebuilt the church, but endowed it with fresh gifts of land. The charter in behalf of "myn own mynster" "in Oxenford" was signed on the octave day of St. Andrew *circa* 1004 by the King, by

¹ Cf. Lingard, *History of England*, 1849, vol. i. p. 137.

Archbishop Ælfric of Canterbury, Archbishop Wolstan of York, and by many a bishop and by many a noble. It is not clear what priests served the minster at this time, for the place, like the Abbey at Bath, had ceased to be a house of religious women during the Danish invasions. It seems to have been alternately a collegiate church with secular canons, and a monastic foundation.

About 1111 or 1121, a learned priest named Guimond was Court chaplain to Henry the First, and he took it ill that while his dissolute and tyrannical prince nominated to bishoprics and benefices men who were but slightly educated, the learned clergy were passed by. So, when saying Mass before the King on one of the Rogation Days, he came in the Epistle of the day, taken from the fifth chapter of St. James, to the well-known passage: "And it rained not for iii. years and vi. months," he pretended to blunder over the Roman numerals, and read it as follows: "And it rained not for one, one, one years, and five, one months." The courtiers smiled at the chaplain's apparent ignorance, and when Henry afterwards rebuked him for it, Guimond answered: "You give benefices to people who read just like that. Know, sire, that henceforward I will be the courtier of none but the Great King Who grants not mere temporal but eternal favours to His servants." So Guimond left the world for the cloister, and when the Bishop of Salisbury, Roger, the King's Chancellor, installed the Canons Regular of St. Augustine in St. Frideswide's, that prelate placed Guimond over them as their first Prior. Henry, who with all his faults was magnificent and royal in his gifts, endowed the Priory with large possessions, probably restitution of property alienated at the Conquest. He gave among other gifts the livings of All Saints, St. Peter le Bailey, St. Michael, half that of St. Aldate, and of two other city parishes, now no more, St. Edward's near King Edward's Street, and St. Mildred's, whose site is now occupied by the Hall of Exeter College. Henry presented also to St. Frideswide's the old home of the Virgin Saint at Binsey and the land round about, and a church was built there soon after, which spite of later alterations is standing to this day. Stephen and his rival, the Empress Maud, vied with each other in their grants to the shrine of Oxford's Patron Saint.

It was possibly under the active rule of the first Prior that the building of the church, much as it now stands, was begun