

**THE CHURCH-WARDENS
ACCOUNTS OF THE PARISH
OF ST. MARYS, READING,
BERKS, 1550-1662**

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The Church-Wardens Accounts of the Parish of St. Marys, Reading, Berks, 1550-1662 by
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TRANSCRIBED BY
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AND
A. G. GARRY.

PREFACE BY THE LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD.

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TO
WILLIAM FRANK BLANDY
AND
JOSEPH EDWARD SYDENHAM,
CHURCHWARDENS OF ST. MARY'S,
READING,
THIS RECORD
OF THE LABOURS OF THEIR
PREDECESSORS
IS
DEDICATED.

Preface

BY

THE LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD.

The architectural and archaeological History of our Parish Churches has been carefully studied and elaborately illustrated in many great books during the last hundred years. But their economic history has not until very lately received much attention, certainly not so much as, in its relation to the administration of local and parochial government, it would seem to demand. As a rule we have had to content ourselves with the statements of the ecclesiastical law books on the subject of the repair of Churches, the law of Church rates, the duties of Churchwardens and the constitution and powers of vestries, as they have been settled either by statute, canon, or legal decision. And yet it was always well known to the local antiquary and to the expert in legal counsel that there existed in the country a variety of customs and practices which, without being legally tested, had stood for ages on their prescriptive usage, and in the variety of their complications might compare well with the minute differentiations of Manorial Customs. We knew also that in the old Account books and Minute books of the Churchwardens in town and country we possessed a very large but very perishable and rapidly perishing treasury of information on matters the very remembrance of which was passing away, although their practical bearing on the development of the system of local government was indisputable, and was occasionally brought conspicuously before the eye of the people by quaint survivals. The present generation has seen some essential changes in parochial administration and is likely to see more; and, although it would be premature to attempt to calculate the curve on which the projected polity of Parish Councils is likely to be drawn, it is more than likely that with all the newness of ideal theory there will still remain most of the influences, personal and social, which prevailed in the Vestries such as we ourselves and our forefathers knew them. It is well that such materials for the illustration of this economic history as have real value should be preserved in print; and that the customs which they illustrate should be reclaimed by History from the misty region of folk lore, whilst they can.

The present volume contains a careful copy of the Churchwardens' Accounts for the Parish of S. Mary's, Reading, from 1550 or thereabouts until 1662; in a word, from the Reformation to the Restoration; a period of English Church History which has its own most embarrassing obscurities; the period, as Mr. Gladstone has called it, of gestation, during which the Catholic and Puritan parties were struggling like Jacob and Esau in the womb of Rebekah; the period, that is,

which was the testing and training time of the system which owes so much to the work of Laud. Laud was a native of Reading and a loving benefactor of the town. Although he was not born or baptized in S. Mary's Parish, the volume before us must contain some points of detail which during his boyhood and early manhood must have been constantly before his eyes, and the effects of which in forming his ritual views and practices may be traced, by and by, by some student who has time and taste for such investigations.

The first thirty-one pages of the Account book, occupying pages 1—24 of the printed copy, are filled with the details of the sums expended in the demolition of those parts of the great Abbey, some materials of which were bought in 1550 by the inhabitants of S. Mary's Parish for the rebuilding of their Church; these included the timber-work of the roof of some portion of the Abbey and twenty-one loads of other timber.¹ To this is prefixed a page of undated receipts and the account of the money accruing from the sale of the vestments and other Church goods disposed of, no doubt, before the end of the reign of Edward VI. The thirty-one pages probably represent the whole of the Church account during the time of building, and contain very few particulars that concern anything else. It is scarcely to be expected that they should furnish much illustration of the changes that were taking place in the Church during the process. We may, however, infer from the mention of the Vicar's surplice at p. 4, that that part of the account was put down before the close of 1553; and the note of providing the Manual, the Church book, and the building of the Altar as well as the paschal and font tapers, would show that page 15 was reached before the end of 1558. The 'Paschall' at p. 20 belongs to the same period. The payment for putting on the roof at p. 23, and for the cross and vane at p. 24, probably mark the completion of the building, and the regular account of the Churchwardens beginning in 1555 may be understood to denote that by that time the Church was open for divine service. These fabric accounts furnish some details of interest connected with the price of labour and materials, the localities in the neighbourhood from which wood, stone, and lime were procured, the names of occasional benefactors, and in the long lists of the workmen perhaps some significant particulars illustrative of the rise of Reading families. They may be compared with advantage on these points with the fabric rolls of other Churches of the same period, which have been given to the world of late years in various archaeological publications.

From the year 1555 onwards the accounts of annual receipts and expenditure are continuous and complete. As the Church, now well and strongly built, would not require repair for many years, the demands on the parishioners for that purpose occupy a small space in the accounts over and above current expenses for cleaning and the like. Only once in the first half of the account, which covers more than half a century, is a taxation or levy of contributions found necessary; this is in 1607; and the expenditure then includes a heavy outlay on the bells. The Clock was put up in 1612. In 1646 and later, the windows are beginning to require repairs.²

(1) *Dugdale's Monasticon*, iv., 39: below p. 4. (2) pp. 166 (1646), 171.

A very brief analysis of the receipts and expenditure is all that is possible in this place: the receipts include:—

1. The payments for seats which appear continuously from the year 1556 onwards. These payments show that the theory of appropriation by the Churchwardens was accompanied with a practice of payment, annually made, and an additional sum on removal from one place to another (see under 1608, 1609, and 1615, pp. 105, 107, 121); an important illustration of the state of things out of which the pew-system subsequently emerged.¹
2. The rents and quitrents from the houses belonging to the Church and Parish; it is very probable that under this head some interesting particulars of local history may be found.
3. The sums received for the use of the pall and for the ringing of the Church bells on the occasion of deaths and funerals.
4. The payments for graves, which may be usefully collated with the Burial Register of the Parish printed in 1892, under the editorship of Mr. Crawford.
5. The sums received under the head of Gatherings, 'Gathering days, and other receipts.' This is by far the most interesting head on this side of the account and the one which affords most illustration of local custom and variation of economy and ritual. The following points may be briefly noted:

(a.) The 'Paschall money at Easter' which appears in the account for 1557, (p. 28), and in the form of 'Paschall' simply, onwards to the year 1598, must correspond with the gathering for the Paschall taper mentioned in the accounts as late as the year 1560 (p. 36).² It seems probable that the collection made for the taper, which would be disused early in the reign of Elizabeth, was continued under the name of Paschall or Easter money. Once in the accounts in 1593 (page 74), the form 'Paschall Lamb' occurs, possibly a reminiscence of the time when the wax not used for the taper was melted into little medals and distributed or sold under the name of 'Agnus.' It may, however, be a mere clerical error.

The 'Paschall' disappears at the close of the century. It occurs in 1598; and the following year the 'Communion at Easter' succeeds. The sum raised under this head was expended on the bread and wine for the Easter Communion; half of it was assigned to the Vicar, and half to the Churchwardens; each provided a half of the elements for the Sacrament. The surplus of the contributions went, of course, half to the Vicar for his own use; half to the Churchwardens for the use of the Parish. This arrangement seems to have been made renewable at each change in the Incumbency.³

The Easter Communion seems properly to refer to Easter Day only: but Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Low Sunday were also special Commu-

(1) See 'Remarks on Seat Reservation in Churches,' *Archæol.* liii., 95 *sq.*

(2) *Cp.* p. 15; Easter money, p. 16; paschal, pp. 1, 20, 28 *sq.*

(3) See pp. 42, 56 *sq.*