

II.

NOTICE OF THE HOSPITAL OF ST MARTHA AT ABERDOUR, FIFE. By THE REV. WILLIAM ROSS, ABERDOUR.

Spottiswood, in his "Religious Houses," speaking of the nuns who followed the rule of St Francis, says:—"The nuns of this institute had only two houses in this country, viz. Aberdour, in the shire of Fife, and Dundee, in the shire of Angus, of whom there is little or no mention made by our writers." (Chap. xviii. § iv.)

All that local tradition adds to this meagre notice, in the case of the old religious house at Aberdour, is, that the nunnery stood on the site now occupied by the Old Manse, on the north side of the street of Easter Aberdour; and that certain lands in the neighbourhood, called "The Sisterlands," belonged to it. Investigation has, however, brought to light some facts connected with the nunnery, which it is the object of the present paper to state.

For the facts now to be stated regarding the foundation of the house, I am mainly indebted to three papers (Nos. 231, 232, 233) of the "*Munimenta Vetusiora Comitatus de Mortoun.*" Other authorities will be named as they are drawn from.

The house, which was, strictly speaking, an *Hospital*, owed its origin to James, the first Earl of Mortoun: and the circumstances that led to its institution are interesting, as giving a glimpse of the opinions and habits of the time.

In the fifteenth century, Aberdour was much resorted to by pilgrims and poor persons—the great source of attraction being a *holy well*, of which I shall have something to say at a later stage. The heart of Sir John Scot, the vicar of Aberdour, was moved at the thought of the little accommodation afforded to these pilgrims; and he earnestly besought the Earl of Morton to provide some shelter for them, hinting that it was a good opportunity for doing something towards the expiation of his own sins, and those of his progenitors. The vicar's suggestion was warmly entertained, and the proper steps were taken to have the work immediately gone about.

It being the Earl's intention that the vicar should have the care of the proposed hospital, and Sir John being a canon-regular of St Colme's Inch, it became necessary that the consent of the abbot and convent should be obtained. A representation was accordingly made to them; and in 1474 Michael, the abbot, and his brother canons, gave their consent, and solemnly bound themselves not to alienate the property of the contemplated hospital, nor turn its revenues to any other purpose than that designed by his Lordship.

In their deed of obligation a charter of the Earl's is recited, in which he makes over to the vicar "that acre of land lying within the territory of his town of Aberdour, at the east end of it, and on the north side of the road which leads towards the town of Kingorn." His Lordship relates how the pious importunity of the vicar had induced him to consider whether he should not do something of this kind, which might form a solace to pilgrims, and some measure of support to the poor, and which might, at the same time, be dedicated to God, and to His most Blessed Mother Mary, our Lady ever Virgin, and to the blessed *Martha*, the hostess of our Lord. It is evidently from the latter that the Hospital derives its name. His Lordship desires it to be marked that he has, for the above-mentioned purposes, given the aforesaid acre, and as great a space over and above it as is requisite for the site of the proposed buildings, with as much ground to the east of the site as would suffice for a cart-road. This is the road which now leads from Easter Aberdour to the cottage called "The Murrell."

It is ordained, in reference to the vicar, that he shall have, during his lifetime, and after him the vicars his successors, the whole care and

management of the hospital ; unless they neglect it, turn its revenues to other uses than those for which they were originally intended, or become oppressors of the poor, or spoilers of their goods.

The Earl further declares, that in case anything should be done at the instance of any of his heirs or assignees to invalidate this grant, he shall in that case be held to have bequeathed to the vicar and the hospital of St Martha *fourteen acres of land* lying at the west boundary of the town of Dalkeith, and which his Lordship had bought with his own money from Marcus Dunbar.

All this is done with consent of the Earl's two sons, John his heir, and James his younger son ; and William Gifford, his Lordship's uncle, is ordered to give state and seisin to the vicar, and the Earl's seal is appended to the charter at Dalkeith on the 10th of July 1474. The convent seal is appended to the obligation of the abbot and canons on the twenty-second day of the same month ; and in a later paper it is stated that *the King* has given his assent to this deed of foundation. *One acre* of land must surely have been quite inadequate to the maintenance of such an hospital as was thus projected ; but the great thing to be achieved, in the first instance, seems to have been to get the Earl "on the ice." A gentle push after that would secure all that was wanted. And so a second paper informs us that in 1479, after the lapse of five years, his Lordship granted *three additional acres* of land in his town of Aberdour, then occupied by John Young the Fuller, and Robert and Walter Cant, ordaining that in case any one should build on the south side of the street near the hospital, there should be left such a space as then existed between the house of Clement Cant and the house of David Hume, that there might be in all time coming *a road* not less than sixteen ells in breadth, *leading to "le pilgramys well."*

In this paper the Earl enumerates those persons whose *souls* were daily to be prayed for by the vicar and the inmates of the hospital. These were the illustrious monarch James the Third ; Queen Margaret his spouse ; the excellent Prince James the Fourth ; James Douglas of blessed memory, *the great-grandfather of the founder* ; James Douglas of blessed memory, his father, and Elizabeth his mother ; then the founder himself ; his illustrious lady Johanna, third daughter of James the First ; John and James his sons, and Johanna and Elizabeth his

daughters; with all his ancestors, successors, and benefactors, and all the faithful dead. Such were the persons whose souls were to be prayed for while the hospital stood; and regularly as the hour of noon came round, the poor persons and pilgrims who found shelter within its walls were to assemble in the chapel after the ringing of the bell, and there, on bended knees, devoutly to repeat five *paternosters* and five *ave Marias*.

In this paper, too, we must not omit to state, there are the most stringent clauses, ordaining that if the rector of the hospital should ever be found turning to a wrong use the revenues committed to his care, or leading an immoral life, he should be expelled from the office to make way for some man who feared God.

We have seen first *one* acre of land bestowed on the contemplated house, and then other *three*; and it has been arranged that the fruit and produce of the lands thus given shall for three years be applied to the building of the hospital, and after that go to the support of the pilgrims.

In 1486, twelve years after the project was entered upon, we find the Earl complaining that, after all he has given, the work is yet incomplete; and in that year he bestows on the hospital other *four* acres of his lands of Inch-Martyn (Eglis-Martyn is an older form of the name), near Aberdour, making altogether eight acres.

In this year, moreover, we detect a change of purpose on the part of his Lordship or the vicar. The first design was to institute a hospital, of which the vicar of Aberdour and his successors in office should be rectors. Now that plan is set aside, and it is resolved on that four sisters of penitence of the third order of *St Francis* shall have charge of the hospital. These sisters were Isobel and Jean Wight, Frances Henryson, and Jean Drosse. And the various gifts which the Earl had made to the hospital, through the vicar, are made over to these sisters and their successors; and it is expressly enjoined that they shall daily enter the chapel of the hospital, at the hour of noon, and repeat, on bended knees, five *paternosters* and five angelical salutations, and such other prayers as it pleases them to offer.

Such is an imperfect summary of the statements contained in these three papers connected with the Hospital of *St Martha*. In the copy of Spottiswood's "*Religious Houses*" which belonged to David Macpherson,

the editor of "Wyntown," and is now in the possession of Mr Cosmo Innes, there are a few extracts regarding the hospital, drawn from some undesignated works which I have been unable to identify. These extracts bear the undoubted marks of authenticity.

From this source we learn that in 1486, the very year in which Lord Morton made his last grant, "John Scot, canon of Inch-Colme, and rector of the Hospital of St Martha, near the village of Aberdour, in Fife, made over to James, Earl of Morton, in favour of Isobel and Jean Wight, Frances Henryson, and Jean Dross, sisters of the holy order of St Francis, the care and administration of the poor travellers." And from the same authority we learn that "the hospital was confirmed by a bull of the pope [Innocent VIII.] on the 9th of July 1487."

Although the hospital was short-lived, having only a period extending over seventy-three years, it might have been expected that some notice of its history should have been extant; but the only notice I can find is one which refers to *its fall*. And for this I am indebted to Mr Innes, who made the jotting from the original paper at Dalmahoy. This note bears that Agnes Wrycht, *mater*, Elizabeth Trumball, Margaret Crummy, and Cristina Cornawell, sisters of the order of St Francis, at the nunnery of Aberdour, set in feu to James, Earl of Morton, the eight acres commonly called "The Sister Lands," with their place and garden in the town of Aberdour; and this they do, with their hand at the pen led by notary, on the 18th August 1560, and the convent seal, which bears an effigy of the Virgin, is affixed.

A few remarks regarding the Pilgrims' Well, referred to in the above narrative, may not inappropriately bring this imperfect sketch to a close. I find no tradition in the neighbourhood in which reference is specifically made to a pilgrims' well; but some old people speak of a well that used to be frequented as lately as the close of last century, by persons afflicted with sore eyes; and they assert that many came from great distances to bathe their eyes in its water. This well, which has now for a considerable time been filled up, was situated about thirty yards to the south-east of the south-east corner of the old churchyard. There is another well with a fine spring of water to the south of this one, and quite close to the harbour; but tradition does not point to it as having more than ordinary virtue in its water. I strongly incline to the

belief that in the former of these we have "Le Pilgramys Well," which drew such a concourse of people to Aberdour in the fifteenth century. Both lie quite in the line of a road leading southward from the hospital, as indicated in Lord Morton's charter above referred to.

It is more than probable that the "Pilgrims' Well" of Aberdour was resorted to long after the fall of the hospital. The practice of superstitiously resorting to wells was dealt with by the Synod of Fife so late as the year 1649. In that year the Synod met at Dunfermline on the 5th of April, and the following is one of their deliverances at that meeting: "The Assemblie being informit that some went superstitiouslie to wellis denominat from saints, ordains presbitries to tak notice of, and to censure these that are guiltie of that falt."¹ It is not improbable that the Synod, in this deliverance, had a view to Aberdour.

If the "Pilgrims' Well" of Aberdour was named after any saint, it may be concluded that *St Fillan* has the best claim to the honour, as he had the parish church under his special guardianship as early as the year 1390. This appears from the following clause of the testament of Sir James Douglas, Lord Dalkeith, of that date: "Item, do lego tres libras, vis. viijd. pro uno vestimento emendo ad ecclesiam Sancti Fulani de Aberdouer." (*Munimenta Vetustiora, &c. de Mortoun, vol. i. p. 174*).

The following extract from Father Hay's MSS., entitled "Scotia Sacra," shows how little accuracy is sometimes found in descriptions pretending to be very exact:—"Monasterium foeminarum ad institutum Divi Francisci in Fifa. Att present the chiefe residence of the Earle of Mortoun. Plurimorum Pontificum continuata serie, indulta, gratia et concessionnes locum nobilitarunt. . . . Genere, opibus et virtutibus, clarus, æqualem per omnia sortitus conjugem, et, quod rarius invenias, conformem moribus, cum nullos liberos ex illa suscepisset Christum sibi adoptavit in suis pauperibus, atque eosdem heredes instituit. Deinde admonitus cælesti oraculo hic se Christo mancipavit; abdicato dominio terræ suæ ut cederet cum omni suo jure monasterio. Rex indulisit, donatione firmata per instrumentum, quod hodie conservant archivis domus. This place is famous for cherries." If for *cherries* in this curious notice we substitute *figs*, it is still applicable.

¹ Minutes of Synod of Fife, p. 165.

Mr JOHN STUART remarked, that the origin of many of our burghs of barony in the sixteenth century, as expressed in the charters of foundation, was the want of accommodation for travellers, and the necessity of encouraging the erection of hostelries for their benefit.