

ST. AUGUSTINE'S OAKⁱ

HISTORIC SITE NEGLECTED

PERISHING LOCAL TRADITIONS

The story is well known of how Gregory,ⁱⁱ afterwards Pope, saw a number of English boys exposed for sale in Rome and, asking who they were, was told that they were Angles, whereupon he said "Not Angles, but Angels," and from this time on desired to convert England to Christianity. The country was Christian during the Roman occupation, but when the Saxons and Jutes came the original inhabitants were driven into Wales and the land reverted to Paganism.

When Gregory became Pope he sent St. Augustineⁱⁱⁱ to England to begin the work of conversion. He arrived in 597 and, after converting the King of Kent^{iv} and many of his subjects, he turned his attention to the Welsh Christians and invited their bishops to meet him.



← Photograph 1 - The site of The Oak

Our authority for this meeting is the Church historian, the Venerable Bede,^v who died in 735. He says it took place at a spot "known in the English language today as St. Augustine's Oak and which lay on the borders of the Hwicci^{vi} and the West Saxons." In modern language that is on the borders of Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. This border is cut by the old Roman road from the south – Ermine street, which ran right into the heart of Wales and along which both St. Augustine and the Welsh Bishops would most naturally travel – in the neighbourhood of Cricklade. It is further to be noted that this place is just half-way between Canterbury and St. Asaph^{vii}. Now at Down

Ampney, a couple of miles from Cricklade, there is a spot called "The Oak" and so marked on the Ordnance Survey map. This is the traditional site of the meeting of the Welsh Bishops with St. Augustine.

It is true that there is a place called Aust on the banks of the Severn opposite Chepstow, which also claims to be the site and has received considerable support. But it is curious if this were the real site, why Bede should not have defined the place by saying it was on the banks of the Severn, as in those days rivers were such prominent landmarks. At any rate, after an exhaustive inquiry into the matter, Bishop Forrest Browne,^{viii} who was a great historian and, living in Bristol, was in close touch with the locality, came to the conclusion that the Down Ampney site alone fitted in with Bede's description and with the narrative that follows.

St. Augustine's object in meeting with the Bishops was to induce them to recognise his authority as their metropolitan and to get them to conform to the Roman practice, especially in the matter of the date of keeping Waster, for up to now they had followed the practice of the Eastern Church in this matter.

After some argument, in which he failed to convince them, St. Augustine suggested that the matter be settled by a miracle. A blind man was brought forward and the Welsh Bishops were given the first opportunity to cure him. They failed to do so. The St. Augustine had his turn and succeeded in accomplishing it. He therefore was declared to be the victor, but the Welsh Bishops somehow remained unconvinced and said they could not give up their old customs without consulting first their own people, and so they asked for another meeting.

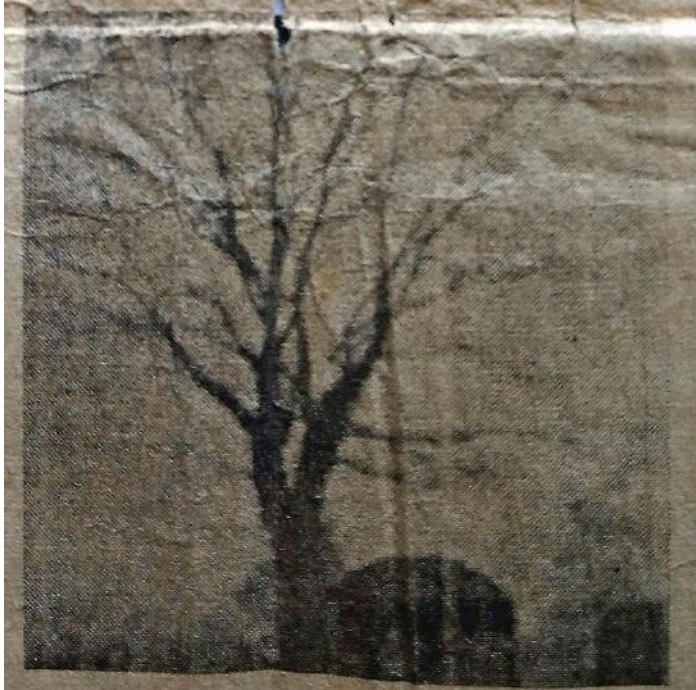
It is a curious fact - and one which would seem to lend no little support to the Down Ampney claim - that there is a well close to the traditional site of The Oak which to this day is reputed to have healing properties especially for persons who suffer with their eyes.

With regard to this alleged miracle - and no one was more credulous or less critical in reporting miracles than the Venerable Bede - it is possible that the man was not really blind and that what really happened was that St. Augustine made use of the healing qualities of this well to restore the man's eyesight to its normal condition. However, that may be, it is very interesting to find that the well is still there and that when Bishop Browne visited the place he found that it was called "the Lertle Well," lertle in Anglo-Saxon meaning "deceitful." Can it be that through all this time the tradition of some trickery having taken place at the well has been handed down, and that when the Welsh Bishops discovered its properties they saw that an attempt had been made to take them in and so christened it with this name, or did someone else?

A second meeting was held between the Bishops and St. Augustine, where is not stated, but it is generally assumed it was in the same place. However, as there is, or was, at a farm near Cricklade another oak called the Gospel Oak, Bishop Browne admitted that this might have been the place of the second meeting, but we must remember that the name Gospel Oak is not uncommon in England.

At this second meeting the Welsh Bishops were advised by a holy man that is St. Augustine showed himself to be a holy and they should submit to him, and if not they were to despise him. Asked how they were to recognise his holiness, he shrewdly replied that they should be careful to arrive at the place of meeting after St. Augustine and as he then rose to meet them on their arrival well and good, but if he remained seated then they should "despise" him. The hermit probably had rightly calculated the character of the representative of Rome. There was no submission on the part of the Welsh that day.

We visited the Oak at Down Ampney and we give some photographs we took then. We were told that quite a number of people come from time to time to see the place. It lies at the entrance to a farm on a winding lane a little way out of the village. In the first photograph the small boy is standing in the hollow where, when Bishop Brown visited the place, were still to be seen the roots of a great tree. When this tree was cut down the then Lord of the Manor was away and he was much displeased at what had been done, and so, to make amends as far as could be, another oak was



planted in a safer spot on the other side of the road. We append a photograph of this oak also: it is now about sixty years old. It is not pretended that even the old oak which was cut down could have lasted right on from the time of St. Augustine, but what does seem probable is that there has been always an oak growing there to keep up this old tradition. The normal life of an oak is, we believe, about three hundred years, but some, no doubt, as the Psalmist says of the life of men, many considerably exceed this

← Photograph 2 - The “substitute” oak

We visited also the site of the well, now – alas! – filled in and the water drained off to a neighbouring stream, but we were told that this water is still used for curative purposes. As old man, who when he was a boy worked on the farm where his father was then the bailiff, told us that at that time people came very frequently to the well to get water to bathe their eyes in. In the third



photograph the writer is seen standing on the site of the well. He told us also that the doors of the Church at Ampney Crucis were made out of the old oak when it was felled.

← Photograph 3 - The Site of the healing well

We think it is a great pity that nothing has been done to mark in any way this traditional site, except that on the Ordnance Map we have the name “The Oak.”

Old traditions easily die out in this modern age, when no longer people remain in the village from father to son to hand on these old traditions as the pride of the village. At the same time we are getting keenness on traditions

and people from the ends of the world to see the site of some famous event, and how careless Americans and people from our own Dominions think us often to be of these precious associations which make out land still home to them!

And for our own people does not patriotism stand largely in this, that they are defending, at such a time as this, a land which is rich with such associations with their own immemorial past as no other land, however [rich] in other [respects]^{ix}, could give them?

Dr. Johnson once said that the difference between a literate and an illiterate person was that between the living and the dead. What he meant was that we all have some poetry and some imagination in us and this can be awakened to life when we come consciously in contact with certain things that touch the springs of our deepest consciousness. In other words, we are “deep sea creatures.” It is the duty of our teachers and guides to awaken us to a richer life by supplying the necessary talisman. The old Oak at Down Ampney we maintain is such a talisman. Let our young people, descendents of the Hwiccii and West Saxons, who live around us visit it and see if it does not transform a dull lesson in a duller history book on a dull afternoon into a radiant fact lit up by a glowing imagination by their being in some way spectators at this great meeting of St. Augustine and the Welsh Bishops.

But, says someone, it is only the reputed site. Good in bad matters certainly can never be attained: a great many sites of other events have far less in their favour. All we have tried to do is to show that there is strong presumption in favour of this being the true site. Let us act on that.

We have to acknowledge great assistance, particularly in location the sites of The Oak and the well, given by Mr. R.T. Hewer, of Down Ampney, whose own keen interest in the subject made him a valuable coadjutor.

Transcribed by Caroline Morris from a newspaper cutting held in the Corinium Museum archive

ⁱ The author of this article was not listed in the newspaper clipping used for transcription

ⁱⁱ Pope Saint Gregory I (Latin: *Gregorius I*; c. 540 – 12 March 604)

ⁱⁱⁱ Augustine of Canterbury (born first third of the 6th century – died probably 26 May 604)

^{iv} Æthelberht (also Æthelbert, Aethelbert or Ethelbert - c.550 – 24 February 616) was King of Kent from about 589 until his death

^v Bede (672/3 – 26 May 735), also known as Saint Bede, Venerable Bede, and Bede the Venerable, was an English Benedictine monk at the monastery of St. Peter & St. Paul in the Kingdom of Northumbria of the Angles.

^{vi} Hwicce was a tribal kingdom in Anglo-Saxon England. After 628, the kingdom became a client or sub-kingdom of Mercia as a result of the Battle of Cirencester.

^{vii} St Asaph is a city on the River Elwy in Denbighshire, Wales

^{viii} George Forrest Browne (4 December 1833 – 1 June 1930) was an English bishop, the first Anglican Bishop of Stepney from 1895 until 1897 when he was appointed Bishop of Bristol.

^{ix} There were typographical errors in the original newspaper article, the words in brackets make sense as corrections in the context of the article.