

THE "RED BOOK" OF THE ABBEY OF
ST. WERBURGH, CHESTER

GEORGE ORMEROD in a list of original documents relating to St. Werburgh's Abbey, Chester, notes "a fragment of the Red Book of that abbey in Harley MS. 2071, 73".⁽¹⁾ Miss M. V. Taylor describes Harley MS. 2071 as "extracts from the *Liber Ruber*, now in the possession of the Dean and Chapter".⁽²⁾ But it is certain that the "Red Book" is not today in the possession of the dean and chapter.⁽³⁾ J. Tait also mentions Harley MS. 2071 and states that the original "Red Book" disappeared, probably in the middle of the seventeenth century when the remaining abbey records in the custody of the dean and chapter were dispersed.⁽⁴⁾

Harley MS. 2071 (ff. 88-105^b) contains a transcript by the third Randle Holme, genealogist and antiquary, 1627-1699, headed "In Libro Rubro Abbatie Cestrie". He begins with the note "this booke is Auntiently written in parchment and Contayneth Coppies of Sutes out of Courte roules with some Coppies of deeds and other good notes Conservinge the Monastery of St. Werburges. But it is much defaced slubbered worne and many leaves torne out which makes it very imperfect: but what possibly I could gather I have as neere as I can transcribed for future possterity, november 1649".

This description and a collation of the manuscript with Harley MS. 2148, also in the Holmes' collection,⁽⁵⁾ make it evident that the latter is the source of Randle Holme's transcript; he transcribes from folio 4 to folio 38 and there breaks off in the middle of a sentence. His transcript is of some value for it adds a leaf, torn out of Harley MS. 2148, from a copy made, as Holme states, by William Vernon⁽⁶⁾ before it was lost.⁽⁷⁾ On the other hand Holme notes (f. 105) that folios 26 to 52 were missing from the "Red Book". Eleven of these (new foliation 26-37) subsequently have been replaced. The folios of the manuscript were originally numbered before the loss and replacement of the leaves which makes it possible to establish their position in the manuscript.

Harley MS. 2148, *temp.* Edward II, is incomplete; some folios are misplaced and a number are in poor condition. There are seventy-one leaves which vary in size from about $10\frac{3}{4}$ " \times $7\frac{1}{2}$ " to

⁽¹⁾ G. Ormerod, *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester*, ed. T. Helsby (1875-1882), Vol. I, xxxvii.

⁽²⁾ M. V. Taylor, "Some Obits of Abbots and Founders of St. Werburgh's Abbey, Chester", in the Record Soc. for Lanc. and Cheshire Publications (1912), Vol. LXIV, 88, 89.

⁽³⁾ My thanks are due to the Archdeacon of Chester, the Ven. R. V. H. Burne, and Major F. G. C. Rowe, county archivist of Cheshire, for kindly verifying this point.

⁽⁴⁾ J. Tait, *The Chartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester*, Chetham Soc., 1920, Pt. I, xxx.

⁽⁵⁾ The Holmes' MSS. are numbered 1920-2180, with a few others, in the Harleian collection in the British Museum.

⁽⁶⁾ William Vernon was a friend of Dugdale and made a collection for a projected history of Cheshire which he abandoned about 1652.

⁽⁷⁾ Harley MS. 2071, ff. 96, 96^b; the lost leaf was between ff. 16 and 17 of Harley MS. 2148.

11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 8". Folios 4 to 69 are of vellum and contain records of litigation concerning the property of St. Werburgh's abbey during the reigns of Henry III, Edward I and Edward II, with insertions of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The greater part of the manuscript is written by one scribe in a good charter-hand. Folios 1, 3, 70, 71 are of paper and contain an *Index Virorum* and *Index Locorum* (both incomplete) by the third Randle Holme. His hand occurs frequently in the margins, from folio 53 onwards, listing the names of places and people. The Holmes's press-mark appears on the fly-leaf.

The "Red Book" is related to a Roll, in various hands, *temp.* Henry III to Edward II, now Additional Roll 51525 in the British Museum. The "Red Book" is probably not a copy of the Roll for it has a few small additions⁽⁸⁾ and slight variations in spelling. It follows closely the *verso* of the roll,⁽⁹⁾ but omits the pleas of the forests⁽¹⁰⁾ and the last three paragraphs, and contains extracts from the *recto*.⁽¹¹⁾ The Roll is incomplete at the beginning, but the "Red Book" does not make it possible to supply the missing portion, because of its omission of the last three paragraphs of the *verso* and the entries on the first membrane of the *recto*. Extracts from the Roll, with a description, have been published by Miss E. K. McConnel who suggests that the Roll may have been one of a series.⁽¹²⁾ The third Randle Holme made a copy, partly paraphrased, of the Roll, *verso* and *recto*,⁽¹³⁾ and states that the Roll was then in the possession of Sir Thomas Aston, bart., of Aston Hall in Runcorn, Cheshire, 1600-1645.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Roll came to the British Museum in 1903 with the Aston charters.

It is possible that Harley MS. 2148 was not the only manuscript of St. Werburgh's abbey known to the seventeenth-century antiquaries of Cheshire as the "Liber Ruber". The list of contents to a Cheshire collection written by or for Sir Peter Leycester, 1614-1678,⁽¹⁵⁾ contains the entry, "ex libro rubro vocato sanctorum prisca" which refers to a manuscript, *temp.* Edward I, containing transcripts of charters and other material, relating to the property of St. Werburgh's abbey, now Harley MS. 2062. Leycester's work entered the Holmes' collection sometime in the seventeenth century and is now numbered Harley MS. 2060. Tanner in the *Notitia* notes the "Librum Rubeum, et alia registra, rentalia cartas originales, etc. de terris et possessionibus hujus abbatiae episcopatus et ecclesiae cathedralis, penes RR. DD. episcopum, decanum et capitulum Cestriae".⁽¹⁷⁾

⁽⁸⁾ For example ff. 46, 46^b have an addition "Edwardus etc. . . . vicesimo septimo" which is not in the Roll at the end of membrane 2 where it would belong.

⁽⁹⁾ Harley MS. 2148, ff. 44-57. J. Tait, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, xxx, overlooked the relationship of the two MSS.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Membrane i, para. 2 of the *verso*.

⁽¹¹⁾ Add. Roll 51525, membranes 2-5, *passim*.

⁽¹²⁾ "The Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester, in the Thirteenth Century", *TRANSACTIONS*, Vols. LV and LVI, pp. 50, 51.

⁽¹³⁾ Harley MS. 2149, ff. 128-138.

⁽¹⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, f. 128.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Sir Peter Leycester, antiquary, of Nether Tabley, Cheshire.

⁽¹⁷⁾ T. Tanner, *Notitia Monastica* (1744), p. 58.