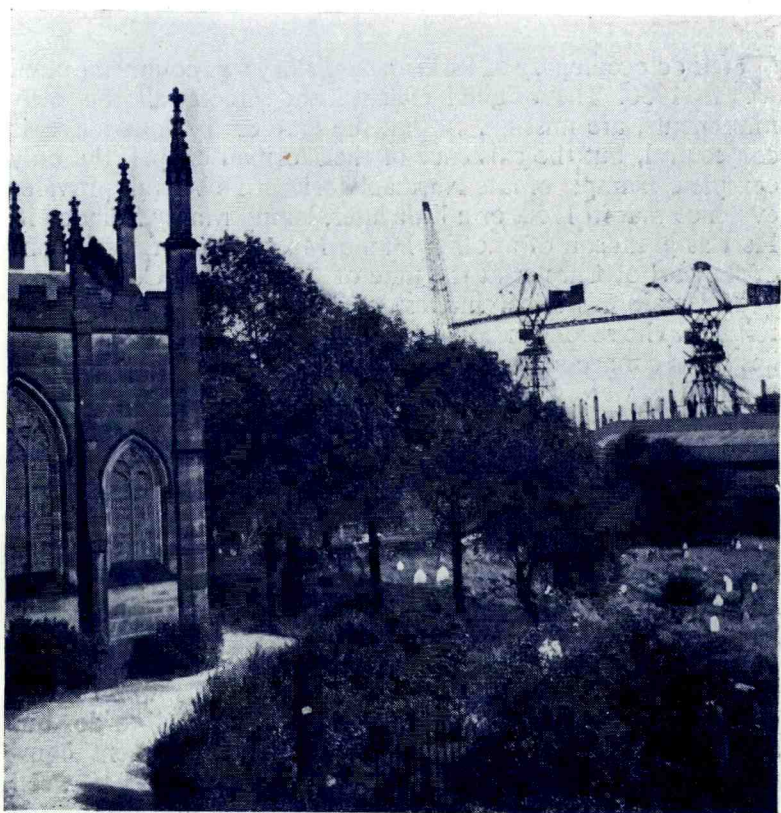


THE ANCIENT GRAVEYARD OF BIRKENHEAD PRIORY

THE octocentenary of Birkenhead Priory was commemorated in 1950. The original charter, and indeed all the early muniments, are missing, so that the date of the foundation is conjectural, but the existence of the Norman chapel, the only complete example of late Norman work in the Wirral, provides evidence that in 1150, or a little later, Hamo Mascy founded it. He was grandson of another Hamo Mascy, one of the barons of the earl of Chester at the time of the Norman Conquest.

The main historical interest of Birkenhead Priory, whose ruins are the second-best monastic ruins preserved in Cheshire, lies in its connection with the Mersey ferry. It was in 1317 that the monks were given the right by the king to sell food to passing travellers and to build a house to accommodate them. No doubt the strain of providing board and lodging, without payment, for considerable numbers of wayfarers, perhaps for several days, was too much for the resources of the monastery, and Edward II issued a royal licence to allow them to construct the necessary accommodation. A few years later, in 1330, Edward III confirmed the licence granted by his father, and gave the monks and their successors for ever the right of ferry with permission to charge reasonable tolls. Passengers had of course been carried before that date, and the monks had probably looked to the voluntary alms of the well-to-do, but apparently the action by Edward III made payment compulsory. This is reminiscent of St. Bernard's monastery between Switzerland and Italy. Some thirty-five years ago free meals were still given to passing travellers, though motorists had already been excluded. This had gone on for many years. Voluntary contributions were expected at the conclusion of an excellent meal, but the total collected in this way amounted to only one-third of the value of the food, and this age-long custom had to be stopped. The resources of the monastery were insufficient to meet the demand. So it must have been with Birkenhead Priory, which was never a rich house, and charges had to be made.

Though the monks possessed the right of ferry from Birkenhead to Liverpool, the lord of the manor of Liverpool retained his rights on the ferry from Liverpool to Birkenhead. These passed in the eighteenth century by purchase into the hands



BIRKENHEAD PRIORY GRAVEYARD
Looking south-east



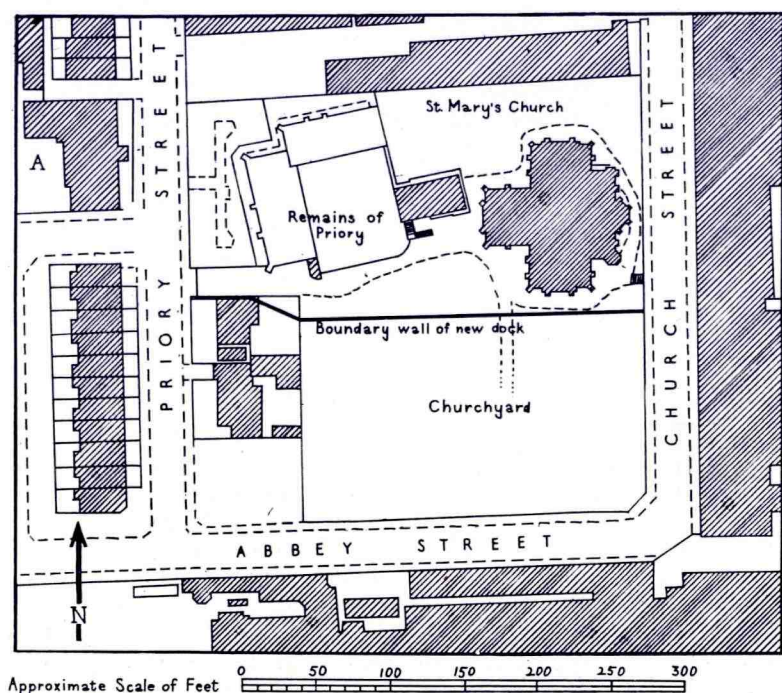
BIRKENHEAD PRIORY GRAVEYARD
Looking north-east

of the mayor and council of Liverpool, but the town authorities so neglected their rights that it came to be believed that they too belonged to the lay successors of the monks. It is for this reason that, for many years, passengers by the Woodside ferry have paid their toll on the Birkenhead side whichever way they have been travelling.

Little is known of the monastic graveyard which existed on the headland close to the Priory. Tombstones have been found, and are now to be seen in the old Norman chapel, which became the chapter house, when a larger chapel was built by the monks. Only one is identifiable, that of Thomas Rayneford, Prior, who died in 1473. The Latin inscription can still be read. It was dug up in 1818, and three skeletons, in a very perfect state were found buried underneath.

After the dissolution the old graveyard was presumably still used, though the registers only date from 1719, and there is no actual record of burials before that time. The maintenance of the old Norman chapel was due to the fact that it was small and easily repaired, yet big enough for the local congregation. Neighbouring vicars seem to have acted as ministers. The first entry in the burial register is that of Rev. Robert Janny, vicar of Overchurch and vicar of Birkenhead. It is interesting to find that he was buried in the old Priory graveyard, and not in his own at Overchurch. The latter still exists, though hardly known, and completely overgrown, on a site adjacent to the Birkenhead Children's Home at Upton. It is natural to suppose that he preferred to be buried in the spot where once holy men worked and prayed. A certain sanctity must have attached itself to this area, and the graveyard was used for many years even up to this century. About 1850 the registers show that burials were taking place at the rate of five hundred a year. There must be many thousands, known and unknown, buried in this sacred spot. It is indeed holy ground. Perhaps the best-known tombstone is that which reads, *Here lies the body of Martha Lary, the mother of nineteen children, who departed this life the 4th April 1777 aged 101*". She must have seen the accession of James II, and lived well into the reign of George III.

Thus the graveyard has been in use for eight centuries. Many have resented the neglect with which it has been treated in this century, and for many years its general appearance has been deplorable. The modern church of St. Mary was built within it about 1820 at the expense of the lay owner, who no doubt saw the expansion that was coming, but the greater part of the churchyard was untouched. Of recent years friends of



THE SITE OF BIRKENHEAD PRIORY AND GRAVEYARD, 1956

It is understood that the new dock will take part of Abbey Street and the south end of Church Street. The part of Church Street to the east of St. Mary's will probably be incorporated in the church grounds. The building marked "A" now houses commercial premises, but it was formerly St. Mary's School.

the Priory have urged that it should be made into a small park, and that, if the ecclesiastical authorities were unable or unwilling to maintain it, they should offer it free for that purpose to the Town Council. Many members of the latter, and others, had expressed themselves as favourable to the suggestion, but unfortunately nothing was done in spite of the efforts of the few. Such an open space, where there are so many inhabited buildings crowded together, would have been of great value to the community, and it caused keen regret when it was heard that the ecclesiastical authorities were proposing to sell it in order that a new dock could be constructed on that site. Thus were shattered for ever the hopes of those who had envisaged the provision of a small park in which old people and others could see visions and dream dreams of the past. Indeed some had looked forward to a day

when buildings to the east of the site could be removed, revealing once more a view of the Mersey on which, from this headland of birch trees, the monks had gazed for four centuries, followed, for a further three centuries, by the lay owners and their friends.

It has already been stated that many had regretted the state of desolation into which the graveyard had been allowed to fall, and had long urged that it should be handed over to the Town Council for the above purpose. The precedent of 1896 would then have been followed when the Council secured the majority of the ruins, and gladly spent £3,000 on their restoration and repair. Much of this was done under the influence and supervision of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire. It was for this reason that this new threat naturally alarmed the Society, so that they sent representatives to the government enquiry held at the Town Hall, Birkenhead, in the earlier part of 1956. Some of their members had been active for months beforehand, with letters to the Press, and interviews with those concerned. Unfortunately, however, the Society was helpless against the combined opposition of industrialists, Town Council, and, most unhappily, the ecclesiastical authorities, who had little regard for their ancient inheritance. Thus there will pass away the holiest spot in Birkenhead, where rest the bodies of the holy men of the past who served God in prayer and praise upon this headland, and where also rest the bodies of our predecessors who, after the dissolution, played their part in the life of Wirral and served their generation.

One more thing should be said. Our Society has always recognised the needs of the present generation, and has never neglected that aspect. In this small island some fifty million people live. They have to export to live. Industries have to be encouraged and helped, and the use of this graveyard may be essential to the continuance of our present standard of life. The Historic Society, while it deploras the loss of the graveyard, realises such needs full well; but it is justified in deeply regretting such a loss, however necessary it may be.

I am grateful to Mr. E. H. Hubbard who has drawn the plan and taken the photographs to illustrate this report.

W. F. BUSHELL