

## HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE MANOR OF KNIGHTON, IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT.

By the REV. R. G. DAVIS.

Conspicuous by its height, and rendered more conspicuous by the triangular sea-mark on its summit, stands not far from Brading, on the eastern side of the Isle of Wight, the precipitous chalk hill known as Ashe Down. So precipitous is the descent on the southern side, that in the distance of a short mile and a half the road descends from the summit, which is 404 feet above the sea level, down into the marshy vale of Newchurch. Rather more than half way down the slope, nestling in the natural bosom of the hill side is the site of the old Manor House of Knighton, once by far the finest of the Manor Houses of the Island. It was visited in 1816 by Sir Henry Englefield, who in his work on the antiquities of the Isle of Wight, speaks of it "as the most considerable and beautiful of the antient mansions of the Island." The house has since that date been destroyed, and little of it remains save the foundations. The stone piers of the entrance gate still stand in their original position, and on them can be traced the coat of arms granted to Robert Dillington, of Knighton Gorges, in 1599; gules, a lion salient or. The principal front of the house was to the north. At the north-east angle was a square tower of great strength, in whose foundations was a dungeon of considerable depth. To the west was the garden, and at a little distance to the north at the foot of the hill, where there is now a stable, formerly stood the chapel.

Knighton, under its original name of Cheniston, is stated in Domesday Book, to be amongst the possessions of the

King, into whose hands it came by the forfeiture, through treason, of the Island by Roger de Breteville, Earl of Hereford, son and successor of William FitzOsborne, whom William the Conqueror had made Lord of the Island. There are to be found also in Domesday the names of the Saxon holders who held land in Knighton in the time of Edward the Confessor. Nothing is known about them but their names, Oda, Alwoud, Herould, Godwin, Alric, and Brictric. The Domesday Book also tells that at Knighton there was a water mill, and that too in the days of King Edward. Through all the changes of English history did this water mill survive. It was here when the Conqueror came; when men went to the crusades in the holy land. Century after century passed by yet did not stop the whirling of the water mill at Knighton. To-day that water mill is silent. The new replaces the old; the mill has been removed to make way for the Ryde Corporation Water Works.

After the account in Domesday, the first record we have of Knighton is in the reign of Henry III., about the year 1256. At that time it was in the possession of John de Morville. His ancestor William de Morville, had been one of the witnesses to the Charter for the foundation of Quarr Abbey in the 7th year of Henry II., 1161. Very probably he had obtained a grant of Knighton from the crown, and he would undoubtedly be one of the leading noblemen of the Isle of Wight. John de Morville died in 1256, leaving an heiress, his only daughter Elena. She married Ralph de Gorges, a member of a considerable family in the county of Cumberland. From Ralph de Gorges, Knighton received the appellation of Gorges. Ralph de Gorges had born to him a son whose name was also Ralph. Ralph the father died in 1272, and his wife Elena must have survived him for nearly twenty years. In the Rolls of the 20th year of Edward I., that is in 1292, it is recorded that the King has received the homage of Ralph de Gorges son and heir of Elena de Gorges, deceased. Oglander records in his memoirs of this family that "they weare a verie awntient famelye, and lived there verie well; they had theyre chappell, and there, weare manie of them buryed, and had fayre monumentes; ye chappell is

nowe tourned to a brewhowse and ye churchyarde to an orchard. They had a parke there on ye weste syde of ye howse, and ye village wase called Knyghtes Towne, or Knyghton nowe, and ye howse, Knyghton Gorges."<sup>1</sup>

Ralph de Gorges the second had an only daughter, Eleanor; and so again Knighton Gorges passed into the hands of an heiress. She married Sir Theobald Russell, lord of Yaverland. Shortly after his accession, Edward the third asserted his claim to the crown of France in opposition to his cousin Philip of Valois. Edward invaded France and the French retaliated by invading the Isle of Wight. One day towards the end of the year 1340, the watchman in the old watch tower at St. Helens, saw the French fleet coming across the channel. So he lit his watch fire and the news spread from one end of the Island to the other. Up trooped the men of the Island from the valley of Godshill, the wooded dells of Wootton and Osborne; the hardy fishermen of Brading and Yarmouth, and the soldiers from the castle of Carisbrooke. At their head was the brave Sir Theobald Russell, lord of Yaverland and Knighton Gorges. In the meanwhile the French had landed from their ships and in the groves of Nunwell the invaders and defenders met. Long and sanguinary was the fray, but at last the French were repulsed and the men of the Island drove them into the sea with great slaughter. At the moment of victory Sir Theobald Russell fell mortally wounded. He was borne to his home at Knighton, where in the midst of the rejoicings of victory the gallant leader died.

Sir Theobald and Lady Eleanor left an only son who assumed his mothers' maiden name of de Gorges, and became Sir Ralph de Gorges, of Knighton. His son was a Sir Maurice, who was succeeded by his son Sir Thomas who died without issue. One of the daughters of Sir Maurice had married a gentleman of the name of Hacket, whose son John Hacket succeeded to Knighton, as appears by an inquisition taken in the 17th year of Henry the sixth. He also possessed Woolverton, Milton, and other estates in the Island. On dying he left two daughters, Joan and Agnes. Joan married one Gilbert, of Witcombe, in Somersetshire, to

<sup>1</sup> Oglander Memoirs, page 83.

whom she brought Knighton as her portion. The Manor remained in the family of Gilbert till the fifth year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 1565. Thomas Gilbert, of Witcombe, in that year sold Knighton to Antony Dillington, of Poole, in Dorsetshire. Along with Knighton the Dillington family also purchased portions of Milton, Woolverton in Bembridge, and the manor of Cleveland in the parish of Newchurch. These latter Antony Dillington sold to Sir Robert Worsley. As the Gilbert family, though owners of Knighton are always spoken of as of Witcombe, it is very probable that they seldom or never visited Knighton. The old manor house that had been the residence of the de Morvilles, of the Gorges, and of Sir Theobald Russell had fallen into decay. Antony Dillington rebuilt the house incorporating in his new building portions of the old house. Amongst them was a room known as "The Room of Tears;" and it is stated that this name was carved in curious letters over the door. To this room was borne Sir Theobald Russell when he was wounded at Nunwell, and in this room he died. Here his body was laid out in state, and for days his soldiers came to look on the face of their dead leader. To this room his widow Dionysia Lady de Gorges returned after the funeral and not long after in this room she also died of a broken heart. A tradition exists even to this day that after this twofold death the "Room of Tears" was haunted, and that from time to time sweet music could be heard floating around the scene of the two-fold death.

Anthony Dillington left Knighton to his son Robert, who was created a Baronet by James the First. From him the Manor descended to his grandson, Sir Robert, who married Jane Freke, of Iwerne Courtney, Co. Dorset. He died in May, 1689 without issue and was succeeded by his brother Sir John, who died in March 1705, unmarried. During the time of the first Baronet the Dillingtons became one of the most powerful families in the Isle of Wight. They were renowned for their beauty, their extravagance and their wild blood. Old Sir John Oglander says that "Sir Robert Dyllington (next to Mr. Thomas Woorseley) wase one of ye compleatest gentlemen in owre Island, and it wase a pittie he had no issue, that his good parts might haue descended.



If I may speak without partialitie, I verylie bleeve that ye Isle of Wyght nevor brëdd so fine a gentleman as Sir Robert Dyllington (the sonn of Anthonie) wase; he wase as handsome, well complexioned as you coold wisch; he wase a good, not greate travilor and schollar; he had his Latine, ffrench, Spanisch, and Italion tounge he hadd; he wase very honest, stout and valiant; but above all his swëete, noble, merry carridge; as full of conceypts without offense; verie liberol to his ffryndes."<sup>1</sup> Of another Robert Dillington, the descendent of a younger son, old Sir John does not speak in such favorable terms.

The second Sir Robert Dillington was one of the members for the Borough of Newport in the Parliament of 1678, and was twice married.

The third Sir Robert was succeeded by his half brother Sir Tristram Dillington. He left an only child Judith Dyonesia Dyllington. The wild blood of the Dillingtons appears to have found its climax in Sir Tristram. He is said to have driven eight horses attached to his carriage, and that mounted on his favorite charger "Thunderbolt" he would ride furiously down Knighton Shute, and through the gates up to the house. Of his daughter Judith Dyonesia there is still in existence a portrait. If the painter has not flattered her, Judith must have been a remarkably handsome woman.

Tradition states that Sir Tristram Dillington came to his death by suicide. In a very short space of time he saw die his wife and all his children, excepting only the daughter Judith. Dark despair seized him, and with a pistol he put an end to his life. At this time a law was in existence in virtue of which the Crown became possessed of the property of a suicide. When the sad deed was discovered the Steward to prevent the forfeiture of the estate, placed his master's body on his favorite horse and drove him into the pond below the house. It was then reported that Sir Tristram returning home late on a dark night, had lost his way, ridden into the pond and falling from his horse was drowned. In the Dillington Chantry in the church at Newchurch, are on the floor a series of dark stone tombstones bearing the names of

<sup>1</sup> Oglander Memoirs, page 128.

various members of the Dyllington family. Amongst them one has on it the name of Sir Tristram Dyllington. Yet amongst the traditions that gather around old Knighton House, it is stated, that though the stone bears his name, Sir Tristram's body was never buried there. He had committed suicide, and though the fact might be hidden to save the property, it would appear to have debarred him from christian burial. How far this tradition may be true cannot be told, but a few years since, the skeleton of a man of large stature was found in the walled garden to the west of Knighton House. Sir Tristram's estates finally devolved on his two sisters, Hannah and Mary. Hannah died intestate and Mary left the Manor of Knighton by will to her nephew Maurice Bocland. The second Sir Robert Dyllington had left by his second wife a daughter Mabella, who married into the Bocland family. Her son Maurice who was born in 1695, became a Lieutenant General in the Army in 1758, and was twice member of Parliament for Yarmouth, I.W. and once for Lymington. At his death in 1765, he left two daughters, Jane and Lucy. Jane married the Rev. Alexander Bisset of Dublin, and left two sons of whom George became owner of Knighton. In the year 1823, he sold the Manor and estates to Sir Samuel Spicer, from whom they descended to their present owner, Edward Carter, Esq.

Maurice George Bisset about 1820, pulled down the Old Manor House.

Early in this century, when the old Manor was in all its glory, it had been visited by Sir Henry Englefield. In his *Description of the Isle of Wight*, he has left us both a view of the house as also a very beautiful description of its appearance. But in addition to the view published in the *Description*, Sir Henry Englefield has left a drawing of the house in his original sketch book, now in the possession of Dr. Groves of Carisbrooke, and hitherto unpublished. The following description of the house is from the pen of Sir Henry Englefield.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is a general view of Knighton, the seat of G. Maurice Bisset, Esq. in Worsley's History, and a picturesque sketch of the house by Sir Henry Englefield is reproduced in Mr. Percy Stone's book. Also a painting in the possession of Mr. Edward Carter, the present owner of Knighton.

Knighton the residence of G. Maurice Bisset, Esqre. is by far the most considerable and beautiful of the ancient mansions of the Island. It is an irregular edifice, situated on the southern slope of Ashey Down, and surrounded, except to the south by noble groves which clothe the steep slopes of the hills, in the most picturesque manner possible. The ground falls with so quick a descent, that the southern front stands on an elevated terrace, partly formed into kitchen gardens on hanging levels, and partly in a ruder state, up which winds a carriage road leading to the offices. A most copious and crystalline spring rises in a small dell near the house, and is dammed up for the service of a little mill so as to form a pretty pool, at the very foot of this ascent large trees overhang the water on either side amongst which the house attains quite a castle-like appearance. A very antient edifice, which was probably a chapel stands on the margin of the water, and before it was converted into offices must have added most essentially to the beauty of the scene. Even in its present state, it is no offensive object in the picture. The principal part of the house is to the north. It is of the age of Elizabeth, irregular and broken by projections. The windows are large and divided by stone mullions, square headed, and without any smaller arches in the angles of the lights; but their general form is very good, and the stone of which the whole house except the chimnies is built, is of an extremely fine gray tint. The west end of the house is completely enveloped in a mantle of ivy, which having closely invested the walls, winds lightly round a tall stack of clustered chimnies, and embroiders with its deep green shoots, the glowing yellow of the antient mossy tiled roof. At the north eastern angle of the house there is a plain square tower of great strength and antiquity, in whose foundation a dungeon yet remains of considerable depth. Near this tower in the eastern front a part of a very handsome painted window yet remains; its style much resembles that of the windows in Arreton Church and the chapel at Swainston. The southern front has been to a degree modernised by the substitution of sash windows for the antient ones, but its colour is good and two great gables remain uninjured. The house contains several large and convenient rooms some of them have hand-

some wainscot, probably contemporary with the north front. The drawing room on the first floor, is spacious and handsome, and entirely in this style. A long gallery, low and ill lighted, extends through the centre of the house under the roof, and in this is preserved, but with less care than so curious a fragment of antiquity deserves, a very large oaken chest covered with rich niche work, and tracery, of the age probably of Henry the fourth. It is but little injured and the original lock with tracery carved in iron, still remains. No painted glass remains in the windows, except one coat with the arms of Isabella de Fortibus, but this appears to be of a date much later than her time. The little building already mentioned, standing at the foot of the hill seems to be at least as old as the reign of Edward the third. One window alone remains in any tolerable preservation; the form and mouldings of this are uncommon.

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