



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

## THE FORGOTTEN SAXON NUNNERY OF SAINT WERBURG AT HOO.

BY GORDON WARD, M.D., F.S.A.

Hoo is a peninsula on the north of Kent and, if my contentions are correct, more than a thousand years have passed away since the body of St. Werburg was carried thence to safety at Chester and her nunnery became a prey to the fury of the Northmen. It may be that some Saxon scribe or Norman chronicler gathered together what records were left of its existence but, if so, these also have perished. Nor has anyone since sought to do the same. The older county historians are silent. The V.C.H. alone (*Kent*. ii., 12) admits the existence of some conventual establishment but supposes—quoting no authority—that it was ruled by an Abbot. Birch (*Saxon Abbots*, vi.) knew better than this, but the plan of his book did not allow discussion of the subject. This essay therefore is an attempt to bring together such relevant Saxon or later evidence as still remains concerning the origin of this nunnery and its end.

### HOO GRANTED TO PETERBOROUGH ABBEY

St. Werburg was the daughter of a Mercian King (*vide Lappenberg, etc.*) and so the story starts, reasonably enough, with the charters which made the land of Hoo part of the Kingdom of Mercia. The first of these is of the year 664 (*Cart. Sax.*, xxii.). It is known from copies only, not very satisfactory copies, and purports to witness various gifts made by Werburg's father, King Wulphere of Mercia, to the Abbey of Medeshamstede (better known at a later date as Peterborough or the Golden Borough). The consent of Kings Sighere and Sibbe of Kent to these gifts is shown by their subscribing to the charter and the fact that these very obscure Kentish royalties are mentioned makes it likely that the Kentish parts of the charter at least were founded

on genuine records and should not be condemned because of their association with what are undoubtedly later interpolations. The particular words used in reference to the grant of Hoo also speak well for the authority of this section, which is as follows :—

Quadráginta vero terrae illius manentes ubi Hógh nuncupatur ad Hebureahge insulam pertingentes praedicto Monasterio de Medeshamsted Christique familiae ibidem in propriam pro domino possessionem obtulimus. (And we have given to the said monastery of Medeshamstede and the brotherhood of Christ there, in full possession as a lordship, forty manentes of that land which is called Hógh close upon Hebureahge island.)

Thus King Wulfhere benefited the monastery which his brother Peada appears to have commenced (*A.-S. Chron. anno 655*) and no doubt Peterborough enjoyed the land of Hoo until Wulfhere's death in 675 of which we have the following record (*A.-S. Chron.*):—

And tha ilcan geare Wulfhere forth ferde and Aethelred feng to rice (In that same year Wulfhere fared forth—i.e. died—and Aethelred began to reign.)

King Aethelred, like his father, claimed some sort of suzerainty over the whole of Britain. But this did not enable him to prevent disputes between the kingdoms of Kent and its neighbour Wessex and it is from one of these disputes that we next have evidence of Hoo. In 686 and 687 King Ceadwalla of Wessex and his brother Mull made raids into Kent and in the latter year Mull and others with him were burnt to death, a happening for which the Kent men subsequently paid much blood money. All these things are recorded in the *Ang'o-Saxon Chronicle* and it is also recorded that King Ceadwalla gave Hoo to Peterborough Abbey and presently departed as a pilgrim to Rome where he died. Behind these brief notes we may read that Ceadwalla ravaging Kent in revenge for his brother's burning did some damage at Hoo, or, perhaps took possession of it. But almost at once, turning his thoughts to Rome, he gave back Hoo to Peterborough, with the approval of

King Aethelred who may well have impressed upon him the unwisdom of robbing the church. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Ceadwalla is said to have given :—

Hoge the is in an igland Heabureahg hatte (Hoge that is in an island called Heabureahg).

and it is to be remembered that this particular version of the *Chronicle* (*Laud MS.*) was written at Peterborough and is thus excellent evidence. There is also a charter, copied into the *Black Book of Peterborough* (*Soc. Antiq. MS.*, 1x.), recording the same event. This is chiefly of interest because it recites the confirmation by King Aethelred of Mercia (*Cart. Sax.*, 89) and tells us that the chief men of Kent approved the gift, to which Suebeard King of Kent added a further twenty manentes :—

terrae illius adjacentem terminis quam ante ea in Hoge possederat (adjacent to the boundaries of that land which he—i.e. Abbot Egbalthe of Peterborough—previously possessed in Hoge).

It should also be remarked that the *Black Book of Peterborough* has a marginal reference “De Hough in Cancia” attesting what might seem to some unlikely, namely, that Peterborough should have been given lands in distant Kent.

Although the charters quoted have many unsatisfactory features and even the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* needs reading with discretion, there remains no doubt that in the second half of the seventh century, that is, during St. Werburg's lifetime, a very large area at Hoo in Kent belonged to that distant Abbey of Peterborough which Werburg's kindred had founded. It is pertinent to remark at this place that the church of Hoo is still dedicated to St. Werburg and that in our only record of its pre-conquest existence (*Textus Roff.*, *Arch. Cant.*, XLIV, 39) it is described as “Sancta Wereburh de Hou”.

#### THE KENTISH KINDRED OF ST. WERBURG

The connection of St. Werburg with Kent did not however originate in the transactions recorded above. Both Wulphere her father and his brother Merewald had

married into the Kentish royal family and while Wulfhere's father was heathen (although cynically tolerant of Christianity) his wife's relations had been Christian since the coming of St. Augustine. It was therefore natural that Werburg's sympathies should lie rather with her mother's than her father's relations. There was no nunnery in Kent which had not been founded by her mother's family and we have no reason to suppose that there was at this time any nunnery at all in Mercia. It is certain that this daughter of a King so powerful as Wulfhere must have had such education as was proper in those days—her subsequent career gives ample evidence of this. She could hardly have obtained it elsewhere than in a Kentish nunnery school. We have evidence that she was, after her father's death, closely associated with the government of several such establishments. She can hardly have found her models elsewhere than in Kent. In fact, even if her family relationships had not made it particularly easy, a woman of the piety and administrative ability of Werburg must in any case have regarded the church in Kent as a fount of inspiration for her life's work.

As to that work we have only the authority of Florence of Worcester, writing some hundreds of years after the events with which he dealt. The *Dictionary of Christian Biography* summarizes his evidence as follows :—

Florence of Worcester to whom we owe the most ancient elements of her story says that on the death of her father she renounced the world, entered the convent of her great aunt Etheldreda at Ely and was appointed by her uncle King Ethelred to the office of abbess in some of the Mercian monasteries, in one of which, Trickingham, she died. Her body was removed from Trickingham to Heanbirig by her order and buried there where it was found incorrupt at the time of the Danish invasion.

To the subject of her burial we shall return again. It is enough to have shown that she was not only closely connected with Kent but also eminent in the sphere of ecclesiastical administration.

## THE FOUNDATION OF HER NUNNERY

In the year 697, twenty-two years after the death of Werburg's father, a meeting of the Kentish Witan was held at Bapchild under the presidency of King Wihtred of Kent (*Cart. Sax.*, 91). Of this meeting we have records of excellent authority. It dealt amongst other matters with the management of religious houses and drew up rules which were ordered to be notified to eight named houses in Kent :—

Hoc preceptum statuimus his monasteriis. quorum nomina haec sunt adnotata. primus primi apostolorum principis Petri. Id est Upmynster. Raculf. Suthmynster. Dofras. Folcanstan. Limming. Scepeig. Aet Hoe. (This order we have appointed to these monasteries of which the names are here noted. The first, of Peter the first chief of the apostles, that is, Upminster, Reculver, Southminster, Dover, Folkestone, Lyminge, Sheppey, At Hoo.)

The last mentioned, and therefore most likely the junior establishment, is Aet Hoe. This is actually the only written or traditional statement showing that there was ever a religious house at a place obviously to be identified with Hoo in Kent. But the record holds good and cannot on any score be rejected. Of the other monasteries named all are well known. Upminster is the first, chief or "up" minster of St. Augustine at Canterbury, dedicated at this time to St. Peter; Southminster is Minster in Thanet which bears this name in other charters (e.g. *Cart. Sax.*, 378). Three of the eight are known to have been ruled by Abbots and four by Abbesses. Of Hoo we have no record. But, as Birch has pointed out, there were five abbesses present at this Witan and the fifth must have come from Hoo since there was no other house to which she could have been attached. The names of the five abbesses were Myldrythe, Aetheldrythe, Aette, Wilnothe and Hereswythe. It cannot be said which of these was abbess of Hoo.

When, then, was this nunnery at Hoo founded? and by whom? As late as 686 the land of Hoo was given or confirmed to the Abbey of Peterborough. There is then no mention of any nunnery there, nor is any abbess among the

witnesses. The evidence is purely negative but, as far as it goes, it is hardly compatible with the existence of any religious house in Hoo in the year 686. Ten years later it is in existence, its name appearing last on a list of eight houses. The inference is that it was founded between 686 and 697.

As to who founded it we have no precise information but every indication points only in one direction, namely to St. Werburg. It was Mercian land and she was a princess of Mercia known for her interest in religious houses. But it was also Kentish land, and she was, through her mother, a member of the great church-founding royal family of Kent. It was founded between 686 and 697, and she is stated to have taken the veil in 675 and to have died about 700 (*Onomasticon*). And the Saxon name of Hoo Church was Sancta Wereburh de Hou. It is true that she was not herself the Abbess as might perhaps have been expected. Even of this fact we have sufficient explanation in the pages of Florence of Worcester. The cumulative evidence is certainly not to be despised.

#### WERBURGINGWIC

There are two other records which seem to connect St. Werburg with Hoo. In 823 (*Cart. Sax.*, 373) one of the great councils of Ceolwulf King of Mercia and of Kent was held "in villo regali qui dicitur Werburging wic". In 840 another King of Mercia and Kent gave a charter (*Cart. Sax.*, 152) "in vico regali Uuerburgeuic". In both cases it is Kentish lands which are recorded as being given or sold by these Mercian kings. No one has been able to discover this "Werburg's town"; there is no surviving place name which offers a clue. But if we ask ourselves where the great councils of this period were held we find that most or all were assembled within a few miles of Hoo. The most usual spot was Cloveshoh which is probably Cliff-at-Hoo to-day. Some were held at Acleah—in loco celeberrimo Acleah—which is the Aclea of 975 (*Cart. Sax.*, 1321-2), Acle as late as the twelfth century (*Text. Roff.*, 168) and Oakleigh in Higham now. The much discussed site of Councils named

Cealchythe may also be the hythe or haven of Chalk, another parish near Hoo which is on the Thames side and must surely have had a haven. All these places are within five or six miles of Hoo and form the landward end of the peninsula on which Hoo is situate. They were joined with the other side of the Thames by an ancient ferry; and communication was so far facilitated that both Higham and Chalk, in 1086, are recorded as manors extending across the Thames into Essex (*D.B.*).

It is remarkable that each of the places at which the great councils were held can be easily identified with places in the neighbourhood of Hoo, and that the unknown Werburgingwic may very well be Hoo itself. The place might seem inaccessible—but we know that it was not. It might seem otherwise unlikely—but we know now that it was pre-eminently suitable as a meeting place for Mercian kings with Kentish subjects.

If this reasoning holds, as it well may in the absence of any other suggestion as to the position of Werburgingwic, we have an important addition to the evidence already adduced. There is no longer a gap of 400 years between the death of Werburg and her known association with Hoo, but a gap of only just over 100, and we have the useful knowledge that she was already well-recognized in 823 as the name giver to a royal town at Hoo.

#### THE BURIAL PLACE OF ST. WERBURG

According to Florence of Worcester she died at Trickingham and was later, by her own instructions, carried to "Heanbirig" where her body was found incorrupt at the time of the Danish invasions. There is another and apparently an earlier record in a register of the Abbey of Hyde (*New Minster and Hyde Abbey*, 1892, 86):—

Sancte Waerburge tha halgan faemnan. & heo waes be byriged on tham mynstre the is ge nemned Hean burh. & nu resteth on Legceastre waere byrig. (Saint Waerburge the holy woman, and she was buried in the minster that is named Heanburh, & now resteth at Chester).



Both authorities agree that St. Werburg was buried in the minster of Heanbirig or Hean burh and that her body was later removed to Chester. Florence of Worcester gives the obvious reason for this removal—fear of desecration by the Danes. But there remains what many have considered a difficulty of identifying her first place of burial. The meaning of the word rendered Heanbirig, Hean burh, etc., is not agreed (*v. Wallenberg, Kentish Place Names*, 20). The best and most original form of the word is a matter of dispute. There is a place called Hanbury in Worcester which claims to be her burial place because a single record of 836 (*Cart. Sax.*, 416) tells us that there was a monastery there. The V.C.H. (*Worcester ii*, 3) thinks that must have been “probably a family monastery like those of Bredon and Fladbury”. It is tolerably certain that St. Werburg, royal princess of Mercia, did not really desire to be buried in someone else’s family monastery in Worcestershire. There are other claimants in Gloucestershire and Staffordshire but their names alone recommend them; they are not known ever to have been the sites of religious houses. There is the further and conclusive objection to all these three claimants that they were no more exposed to Danish raids than Chester itself. If the body of St. Werburg was safe at Chester, it would have been equally safe—or safer—in these other places and no need for translation would have arisen.

But if we believe that the Heanbirig of Florence and the Hean burh of Hyde Abbey are identical with the Hebure which gave name to an island in the time of King Wulphere and the Heabure of King Caedwalla, we find that the other facts fit in. This island<sup>1</sup> was, or contained, Hoo—now Hoo St. Werburg—and it was exceedingly exposed to Danish raids. The Danes were wont to spend the whole winter in the neighbouring island of Sheppey, and they wrecked all coastal religious houses of Kent. And when the Danes began to raid, the great Councils were no longer

<sup>1</sup> It is not really an island but a peninsula, a fact which the monks of Peterborough seem scarcely to have appreciated.

held near Hoo and we might very well expect that her body, particularly sacred to the Mercians, should be removed at the same time. And we can understand too how all record, or almost all, of her nunnery was lost by the fury of the Northmen there and at Canterbury.

#### SUMMARY

I deduce from the considerations put forward that Werburg, daughter of King Wulfhere of Mercia and a royal lady of Kent, founded a nunnery at Hoo between the years 686 and 697. She desired to be buried there and, although she died elsewhere, her wish was carried out. After her death we find the town called Werburging wic. When the Danish invasions became threatening, her remains were removed to Chester, and her nunnery shared the fate of its neighbour in Sheppey and of other religious houses in Kent. It may have endured from about 690 to about 840.

It may be objected that much of this is presumptive evidence only and not fact. That objection is, I believe, badly founded. It is both legitimate and necessary that one should seek to weave into a coherent whole whatever scraps of historical material the Saxon era has left us. And in this case, as in others, the resulting picture provides a clue to problems with which it was not primarily concerned, for example, the selection of places in the near neighbourhood of Hoo as meeting places for the great councils and the dedication of this one Kentish church to a Mercian saint.