Link 2: Ruins and Old Trees

https://www.ajhw.co.uk/books/book384/book384.html#Page_1
(Article from 1800s about the history of Melksham Court)

RUINS AND OLD TREES,

ASSOCIATED WITH

MEMORABLE EVENTS IN ENGLISH HISTORY.

BY

MARY ROBERTS,

AUTHOR OF
"THE PROGRESS OF CREATION, CONSIDERED WITH REFERENCE TO THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE EARTH," "CONCHOLOGIST'S COMPANION," &c.

WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS FROM DESIGNS BY GILBERT,
ENGRAVED BY FOLKARD.

Article from the 1800's

Melksham Court.

> "I stood in the ruined hall where my ancestors once dwelt. I asked for the noble owners. Where are they?—and the echo replied, Where are they?"

In the midst of the lone forest which shadowed in ancient times a large portion of the country of the Dobuni *(an Iron Age tribe)* and which extended over hill and dale, far as the distant mountains of the Silures *(a powerful and warlike tribe)* and on either side the river *(the Severn)* that waters this part of Britain, stood a solitary yew. On the verge of the forest, and in places cleared of timber for the purpose, rose the conically-shaped huts of the natives; the dwelling of the chieftain was somewhat larger than the rest, and around it

stood the wattled cabins of his dependents. Their arts were few and simple, and their habits those of men who were scarcely advanced beyond a savage state: corn was occasionally cultivated, but in general they lived by hunting, or fed upon the flocks which they pastured in the open country.

Years passed on, and while the aspect of nature remained the same, all else was changed. This part of Britain bore no longer the appellation of Dobuni; a term derived from the British word Duffen, because the inhabitants frequently resided in places which lay low, and were sunk under hills. It formed a considerable portion of Britannia Superior, and along the side of its beautifully wooded hills, and on its thickly peopled plains, palaces and forums, extensive military roads, aqueducts and schools were rapidly erected. The rattling of heavy-laden cars, and the loud sound of the woodman's axe, with the crash of stately trees, made way for these improvements. In the course of a few short years, the country of the Dobuni lost its wild and forest-like appearance, and far as the eye could reach, the wide-spread landscape presented objects of fertility and beauty. The ancient forest was also curtailed of its grandeur and extent; and the plain country, whose rank luxuriant vegetation concealed marshes, on which it was rarely safe to tread, except in seasons of great drought, was cleared, and thrown open to the sun, and being quickly drained, was covered with towns and villages; corn-fields and meadows succeeded to a growth of underwood, and sheep and oxen grazed where the wolf had been. Sounds too, which of all others awaken images of security and peace—the bleating of sheep along the hills, and the lowing of oxen in the valleys, were heard, instead of the piercing cries of those wild creatures, when ranging in quest of prey. Meanwhile the ample river, whose capricious windings could only be distinguished from the highest hills, was disclosed to view, by the clearing away of tangled bushes, and the cutting down of the huge trees that encroached upon, or shaded its bright waters. The small skin-boats of the natives, and the stately galleys of the Romans, glided along its surface, and commodities of various kinds were brought from one part of the country to the other.

But the day arrived when the galley was rarely seen upon the river. When the skin-boats of the natives ceased to spread abundance along its shores; when many large and fair dwellings were deserted; and when the rolling of chariots, filled with patrician families, whose villas had been erected in some of the most beautiful parts of the country, were no longer heard on the great military road that led from the city of Corinium *(Cirencester).* Instead of these, bands of armed men spread over the land, for the Roman legions were withdrawn, to save the capital from spoliation, and nothing remained for the unhappy Britons but servitude or death. The Saxons came, for such were the strangers called: their looks were bland, and their flowing vestments, adorned with borders of many colours, betokened some degree of civilization; but war was in their hearts, and soon, where cities had stood, and peaceful homesteads met the view, all was silence and desolation. No curling smoke was seen among the trees, the watch-dog's bark had ceased, there were no flocks for him to guard, and only blackened ruins told of what had been. Gradually, however, a better state of things arose; the Saxons contrasted their past condition, their rude huts on the far off shore, their precarious mode of life, with the elegances, and the perfection in the arts and sciences which they observed in the homes which they had won. They learned to adopt the habits and the manners of the Romanized Britons, and to repair the desolations which they had wrought. Kingdoms were established, and though

war occasionally prevailed among the chieftains, there were many who appreciated the blessings, and the security of peace.

Next came the Danes, men of stern countenances and ruddy hair. War-chiefs, accustomed to a life of rapine—they knew no pity; and what the Saxon would have spared, when first he trod the shores of Britain, they ruthlessly overthrew. The forest and vale country around the solitary yew, was grievously infested with them. They took shelter in the hollows with which this part of England abounded, and it was difficult to dispossess them. Those hollows or little glens were so deep and narrow, that the rays of the sun frequently did not enliven them for months together; yet still some of the most accessible were brought into cultivation, and rewarded the industrious husbandman with plentiful crops of corn and grass. Others remained in their native wildness, and wild indeed they were. Shallow streams ran through them, and by means of these they could alone be visited: he who sought to explore their secret recesses must force his way beside the channel of the stream; now stepping from stone to stone amid the water's splash; now clinging to the branches of the trees which drooped on either side. But whether wild or cultivated, there the Danes settled themselves, till they were driven out in the days of Alfred.

Alfred established his throne in righteousness, and the country became respectable and happy. Still the tree grew on, and lifted up its head above the boughs of less stately trees, for the yew does not attain to its highest elevation, or rest in the grandeur of its maturity, till five hundred years have passed away, and when the period arrived, concerning which I shall have to speak, the tree was only in its prime.

The forest had encroached upon the precincts of the fields and meadows, during those disastrous times when the ground was trod by hostile steps, as if it sought to recover its ancient rights; but this might not be, and when peace was restored, the sound of the woodman's axe was heard again, and the usurping trees fell beneath its stroke. Then, also, many of those whose ample branches had long sheltered the margin of the cleared land, were cut down, to make room for wider clearings; and by degrees the noble yew, which had been in the depth of the dark forest, stood but a little distance from the verge of the common, up which the road led, and which being kept free from trees was reserved for the pasturing of sheep. It was covered with short grass and tufts of wild thyme, round which the bees came humming; and gay flowers, such as the bee-orchids, and the yellow cistus, the pink-eyed pimpernell, and yellow rocket, grew profusely beside the pathway. From the summit of the hill extended a noble panoramic view of hill and dale. Downward, and far as the eye could reach, a precipitous descent toward the vale country was covered with the trees of the old forest, which had gradually been curtailed of its extent; towns and villages varied the plain, through which the river flowed, and the strong castles of Dursley and Berkeley, of Beverstone and Brimpsfield, with their ample hunting-grounds, and the crowding dwellings of those who lived near, were seen at intervals.

Generations came and went, and successive monarchs filled the English throne, till the time of Harold, when on the battle-field of Hastings his noble patrimony passed into the hands of the proud Norman. Great changes then took place; strong castles were erected on the site of ancient Saxon fortresses, and while seed-time and harvest did their work, and gradually advanced and retreated, so gradually did the country emerge from out the darkness of past ages, and attain an eminence among the nations of the earth. But as night

succeeds to day, and clouds obscure the cheerful light of the bright sun, so did war succeed to peace, and ruthless men made sorrowful the homes of England. When Stephen and the empress battled for pre-eminence, fell sounds broke up the quiet of the valleys, and fugitives often sought to hide themselves in the still close covert of the forest.

A gay pageant passed one day within sight of the noble yew. Men carrying branches of the beech, and damsels with flowers in their hands, wound up the road; and with them came a train of oxen, dragging a large tree, which had been cut from out the forest. The tree was wreathed with flowers; the horns of the oxen too were tastefully adorned, and when they reached the summit of the hill, the tree was set up, round which the light-hearted party danced right merrily. All this was done in honour of king Richard's marriage. He had sought the sister of the Emperor Wenceslaus, fair Anne of Luxemburg; and when, at length, the final arrangements were adjusted, she left the palace of her brother, attended by the Duke of Saxony, and a great number of knights and damsels, with men-at-arms, and a goodly company, all well appointed to do her honour. They journeyed through Brabant to Brussels, where the Duke and Duchess received the young queen with great respect, and caused her attendants to be honourably entertained, for the Duke was her uncle, and he rejoiced much in the prospects of his niece. Anne expected merely to have spent a few pleasant days in the society of the Duke and Duchess, but, when about to leave them, intelligence was brought that twelve large Norman vessels, well equipped, and filled with armed men, were cruising in the sea between Calais and Holland, and that, under the pretence of seizing all who fell into their hands, they were really waiting for the coming of the lady, whom the king of France was desirous of getting into his possession, that he might frustrate the intended alliance between the English and Germans. The young queen was exceedingly alarmed at such unexpected intelligence. She remained in consequence with her uncle and aunt, till the Lords de Roasselaus and de Bousquehoir, having been deputed by the Duke to negotiate with the King of France, obtained passports for the safe conveyance of Anne and her attendants through his dominions, as far as Calais, as also for the remanding of the Normans into port.

The young queen then set forwards, after taking leave of her august relations and the ladies of the court, who witnessed her departure with much regret. The Duke added to her train five hundred spears, and, as she passed through Ghent and Bruges, the citizens received her with the utmost honour. Thus she journeyed on, till being arrived at Gravelines, the earls of Salisbury and Devonshire approached to do her homage, with five hundred spears, and as many archers. They conducted her to Calais, and, having safely confided her to the care of the English barons, who were appointed to that honour by the king, they returned homeward. Great was the joy of the Londoners, when the train, having passed over the sea to Dover, came within sight of the city gates. Ladies of the highest rank were assembled to receive their queen, all in their best attire, and with them came the great authorities both of the court and city. The gates were then thrown open with much solemnity, and Anne of Luxemburg having been conducted with chivalrous magnificence to the Palace of Westminster, the ceremony of her marriage was completed on the twentieth day after Christmas.

Christmas was well kept that year both in town and country; but when the trees burst forth into leaf and beauty, and the contented note of the solitary cuckoo, was heard in the still forest, the country people thought that they would rejoice again, and this occasioned the May-pole to be set up. They did not gather any branches from the yew, for the yew is

a funereal tree, used to deck the grave of him who has nought to do with the cheerful scenes of busy life.

With the noble train who entered London came Margaret of Silesia, daughter of the Duke of Theise, and niece to the King of Bohemia, as the confidential friend, and first-cousin of the queen. This lady was received with great distinction, and apartments were assigned her in the palace, not only on account of her youth, but that she might enjoy a frequent intercourse with the friend who was most dear to her. But these halcyon days were not of long continuance. The queen died at Shene in Surry, and so bitterly did the king bewail her loss, that he denounced a malediction on the scene of her last illness, and commanded, in the wildness of his grief, that not one stone should be left upon another of the palace where she died. Margaret felt the death of the queen severely; she loved her cousin with a sister's love, and the circumstance of their having left their native land together, and their being to each other what none else could be in a foreign country, had formed between them a bond of no common interest.

The queen deceased without children; but Margaret having married a gentleman of the ducal family of Norfolk, knight of the garter and standard-bearer of England, their only child and heiress, Alana, became the wife of Sir William Tyndale, who was equally respectable in point of antiquity and alliances. His family possessed the valuable domain and title of Tyndale in Northumberland, so called from the south Tyne, which, rising in the mountains and moors of Cumberland, waters that dale, and having joined the north Tyne near Hexham, falls into the German ocean at Tynmouth. Their baronial residence rose proudly on an eminence, which commanded the southern banks of the river. It consisted of a spacious antique quadrangle; the roof and walls being of immense strength and thickness, extended in the form of the letter H; the whole was defended by a fosse, and surmounted with four principal towers, in the position of north and south.

> That castle rose upon the steep, of the green vale of Tyne;
> While far below, as low they creep,
> From pool to eddy dark and deep,
> Where alders bend and willows weep,
> You hear her streams repine."

The ancestral history of Margaret of Silesia, with that of her distinguished husband, was of no ordinary kind. Her paternal ancestors had filled for ten generations the throne of Poland, and on her mother's side she represented Winceslaus the Good, nearly the last of the ancient kings of Bohemia, as also the imperial houses of Luxemburg and Austria. Among the distinguished crowd of those who figured greatly in by-gone days, Piastus is the one, concerning whom I would briefly speak. His character, seen only through the twilight of remote antiquity, is necessarily involved in great obscurity, but light enough remains to discover the moral grandeur of its proportions, as well as to justify the curiosity of his descendants.

Ancient Polish chronicles relate concerning him, that after the tragical catastrophe of Popiel II., when a dreadful famine added to the calamities of the country, and people fell dead in the streets of Cruswitz, that two angels, in the disguise of pilgrims knocked at the door of a private citizen, named Piastus, and asked for relief. The citizen had only a single cask, which contained some nutritive beverage of the country, remaining in his house,

but he would not refuse to help them, and he invited the strangers to partake. Charmed with his benevolence, they promised him the vacant throne, at the same time directing him to open his doors and draw for the relief of the famished population. He did so, and found his cask inexhaustible. The assembled crowds, in their transports, shouted, A miracle! and with one consent elevated their benefactor to the sovereignty of Poland.

From this period the history, both of prince and people, became the subject of authentic narrative. Piastus, like another Numa, retained in his elevation the virtues attributed to him in his private life. The Polish nobles, although accustomed to sanguinary catastrophes, felt their fierceness subside beneath the sway of a monarch who reigned only to make his people happy. He died at an advanced age, beloved, revered, and almost adored by his subjects; and, after the lapse of nearly a thousand years, the name of Piastus is yet repeated with affectionate veneration.

Such is the brief biographical memoranda, which it is possible to rescue from oblivion, concerning the remote ancestry of Margaret of Silesia. She came with great pomp and splendour to the shores of England, and curious has it been to see, while the stream of time flowed on, how some of the noble of the earth, her immediate descendants, were upborn upon its billows; how, in one case, knights and squires represented an elder branch, sober citizens a younger, and how, in a third, the lordly line sunk suddenly beneath the billows.

When the battle of Touton, in the year 1460, made it unsafe for those who adhered to the house of Lancaster to remain in public, the immediate descendant of Margaret, in that branch which is associated with the aged yew, withdrew from his paternal estate and settled in Gloucestershire, where he assumed the name of Hitchen. He married Alicia, daughter and sole heiress of Hunt of Hunt's Court, in Nibley, by whom he acquired that estate, and became the grandfather of William Tyndale, who is justly termed the apostle of the English Reformation.

As the gathering mists of a hot summer evening, when the sun is set, and dew begins to fall, veil the bold and prominent landscape, so the obscurity of time has settled on the Tyndale family. The outlines yet remain: the establishment of Hugh Tyndale in Gloucestershire, during the troubles of York and Lancaster, his marriage with Alicia, and the birth of his three grandsons, John, William, and Thomas, are events well known; but whether Tyndale suffered a long imprisonment in the castle of Vilvorde, near Louvain in Flanders, during the lifetime of his parents; whether days of sorrow and nights of weariness befell them on his account; or whether they were first laid to rest in Nibley churchyard, near which their mansion stood, is entirely unknown. Be this as it may, his brother Thomas had much to suffer on his account. He was abjured for receiving letters, and for remitting him five marks during his residence in Flanders.

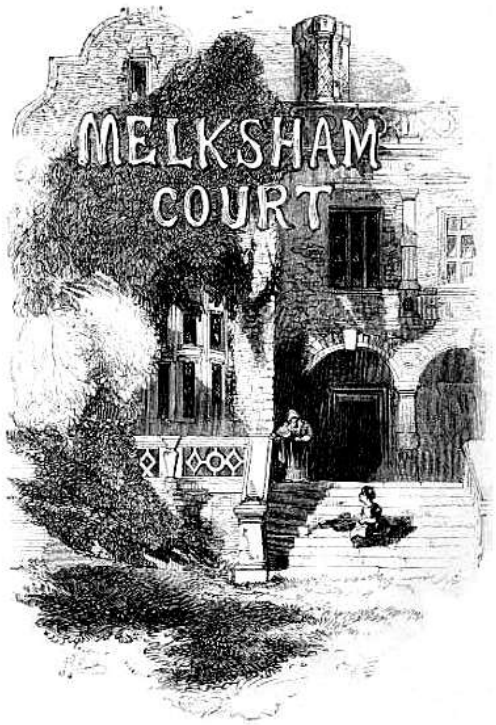
Time went on, and religious animosities gradually subsided; a descendant of Hugh Tyndale purchased Melksham Court in Stinchcombe, on the verge of all that remained of the once great forest. It was a beautiful spot, embosomed in trees, and moated according to the olden fashion, with its terrace-walks and parterres. There his descendants continued to reside, and their days seem to have passed tranquilly, till the stormy reign of Charles I.

The valleys of Gloucestershire lying remote from the metropolis, and being in many respects almost inaccessible, from the steepness of the hills, having also no great public road near at hand, nor the sea within reach, had been often spared from much suffering in very disastrous times; it was otherwise at the present day. The forest, one of their great bulwarks, had been curtailed during successive generations, and much of the moor country having been brought into cultivation, towns and villages were built, and roads were made from place to place. This opened a communication with the thickly peopled parts of Gloucestershire, with such counties also as lay contiguous: the quiet of the valleys was therefore broken up, and the cities of Gloucester and of Worcester, having taken active parts in the stirring incidents of the time, bands of armed men overspread the country. Thomas Tyndale, the fifth in descent from the purchaser of Melksham Court, was then residing on his patrimonial estate: he married a lady on her mother's side, of the knightly family of Poyntz of Iron Acton; but whether—for the mists of time have settled again on the domestic incidents of the family—whether his lady was deceased, or whether he had sent her with their young son and four daughters to a place of greater security, cannot be ascertained. Certain it is, that seeing a band of armed men advancing to the house, he fled for shelter into the forest which skirted his domain. The forest could afford but little aid in his distress. It was otherwise when its crowding trees extended further than the eye could reach, now sinking into the deep, deep glens, whose circling banks, if such they might be termed, rose far above its topmost boughs; now ascending those high banks, and spreading over the vale country, sinking and rising with the undulations of hill and dale, and, when the wind howled among the branches, appearing like the tossing waves of a restless sea. This had been; but cultivation trenched upon the good green wood; spaces were even cleared, and its tall trees, for all the underwood was gone, afforded a ready access to whoever liked to invade its beautiful recesses. One hope for safety remained to the fugitive, and one only. The yew-tree stood in all its beauty and luxuriance, near to the summit of Stinchcombe wood, for such the old forest was now called, and thither he fled for shelter. He was seen to leave the house by a band of soldiers, and they hastened in pursuit of him. They thought that he would make for the nearest glen, or else that he would seek to hide himself in some sheltered nook among the trees. Heaven, in its mercy, prevented them from searching the old tree, whose intermingling branches formed a close and impervious shelter. Yet they passed, and repassed, beneath the shade, and their words were hard to bear. They vowed to have no pity on him, nor on his children, nor on anything that he possessed; and they said, "that if they could discover him in his retreat, they would hew him small as herbs for a porridge-pot." Being foiled in their search, they wreacked their vengeance on his mansion, and during his dolorous sojourn of three days and nights in the tree, he saw the burning of his once happy home, and heard at intervals the voices of his pursuers, as they sought for him again, among the glens, and through the secret passes of the wood. We know not how, nor when the family were reunited; nor can I speak concerning the joys and thankfulness with which they met, for the mists of time rest on this also.

The yew-tree is still standing; around it are the remains of the old forest, and beside it the wild common, with its thyme and flowers among the grass. All else has changed since the days when the noble ancestor of him who fled for refuge to the ample branches of the yew, first landed on the English coast. Neither is the surrounding country such as it was, in the days of Richard. The castles of Beverstone, of Brimsfield, and Dursley, whose turrets were seen in ancient times from the summits of the hill, are fallen to decay, and

instead of these, modern dwellings, with parks and gardens, farms and cottages, overspread the country. The cheerful farm-house, with its lofty rookery, and wide arable, or ploughed fields, with low fences or gray stone walls, are prominent features in the southern portion of the landscape; as also well-timbered villages, occasional heaths, and tufted woods, or rather groves. At the end of summer, the strong colours of the yellow wheat and glaring poppy are finely contrasted with the dark hue of the woods; that hue which becomes deeper and more sombre, till the night-dews have done their work, and the autumnal winds begin to blow, and the dark green leaves are suddenly invested with a splendid variety of tints, from bright yellow to the deepest orpiment.

On the verge of the old forest extend rural villages and fertile meadows, high-aspiring elms, shallow brooks, and wooden bridges, crowding cottages and green lanes, with here and there a church-spire, or gray tower rising among the trees. Gentle swells and hollows, where sheep pasture on the green sward, are seen in another portion of the landscape, with apple-orchards and small enclosures; but along the banks of the Severn the country assumes a different aspect. Its general characteristics are breaks of lawn and thicket, with groves and stunted pollards, all footed and entangled with briars and creeping plants.



A dilapidated court-house, overrun with ivy, and near it an aged church, may be seen by him who knows their locality, from the summit of Stinchcombe hill. The church is the waymark, for the walls of the old court are low, and it is only when the wind favours the sight of them, by causing the branches of near trees to bend beneath its sway, that even the church-tower can be discerned among the young green foliage of the spring. The gardens of the once stately mansion are gone to decay, or else, being overgrown with grass, are fed upon by cattle; the windows were broken by the fierceness of the flames when it was set on fire; and though strong walls, still standing, tell of what has been, not a trace remains of the great oriel window, and the roof has long been gone. He who wishes to trace the former extent of the building may just discover the foundations in some parts;

but in others, not even a few scattered stones, sunk deep in the untrodden grass, would reveal that a mansion had stood there.

Yet Nibley Court once occupied that spot; there a happy family dwelt, and busy scenes went on—the sports of childhood, and the daily incidents of domestic life. There my ancestors resided. But all are gone, and scarcely-discovered ruins, which, as regard all grandeur of appearance, might have belonged to a barn or an out-house, alone remain.

The yew-tree still lives, but that also betokens the lapse of time. Its once ample boughs are few; they yield no shelter now; the blue sky may be seen through them; the stem also teaches that ages have passed away, since it bore up a noble canopy of mingled boughs. A rabbit from the warren on the common might run up the scarred trunk, but it could not find a hiding-place among the scattered branches.