

THE HOSPITAL OF S. NICHOLAS BESIDE THE BRIDGE OF SPEY.

THE Hospital of S. Nicholas, founded in the Thirteenth century, was situated on the right bank of the Spey at the point where the burn of Mulben enters that river. The Hospital was intended for the reception of poor wayfarers (*ad receptionem pauperum transeuntium*), and the place chosen for its erection was at that time very appropriate for its purpose. The burn of Mulben has carved out a deep, though narrow, ravine through the north eastern slope of the hill of Ben Aigen, and this ravine provides a natural route for communication between Morayshire and central Banffshire. Here also the Spey can be crossed without much difficulty. For a short distance above the entrance of the Mulben burn a ledge of rock forms the right bank of the Spey, and, rising several feet above the level of the water, gives one secure and suitable foundation for a bridge. In 1228 there was a bridge over the Spey at this point, and in connection with it the Hospital was placed. This bridge disappeared at an early date, probably before the Reformation, and a ferry boat took its place. Shaw, in his *History of the Province of Moray* (Edinburgh, 1775), gives only a brief notice of the Bridge and Hospital:—

“A brook that falleth into the river at the passage-boat, called the Boat of Bridge, was formerly called Orkil; and the lands on the banks of it were called Inverorkil, which lands Muriel de Polloc mortified, in the Thirteenth century *ineunte*, for building an hospital there, of which some vestiges still remain. And at the mouth of this brook there was a bridge of wood over the river, the pier of which on the east side is yet to be seen. It was called *Pons de Spe* (the Bridge of Spey), and was the only bridge I have found upon that river till of late.”

David Souter, a farmer at Gauldwell in the parish of Boharm, in Appendix IV of his *General Survey of the Agriculture of the County of Banff* (Edinburgh, 1812), gives more definite information regarding the remains of the Bridge and Hospital as existing at that time:—

“When the river is in its lowest state, the foundation of the piers of this bridge may be still seen from the one side to the other, and from their narrowness it evidently appears to have been constructed of timber, and not fitted for the passage of wheel carriages, which at that time were not required. The foundation also of the chapel, or some one of their other apartments, is yet extant.”

The disastrous flood of 1829 may account for the disappearance of any remains of the Bridge before 1834, when the Rev. Lewis W. Forbes, D.D., minister of Boharm, wrote the notice of Boharm parish for the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*. He says regarding the Bridge:—

"Not a vestige of its ruins has been visible for many years. A ferry boat was substituted for it, and the passage of the river, still very important, came to be called by the anomalous name of "The Boat of Bridge," while the farms in the neighbourhood still retained their former appellations of Bridgetown of Spey and Upper Briglands."¹

The suitability of this place for a bridge over the Spey was often recognised after the old bridge had disappeared. In 1796 the Rev. Francis Leslie, minister of Boharm, writing in the *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, pointed out its advantages; and a few years later it was recommended to the Commissioners for Roads and Bridges in the Highlands, who at first seemed to regard the proposal with favour, but ultimately in 1810 decided that a bridge there would be too near the bridge of Fochabers (which was completed in September, 1805) to justify them in affording public aid towards its erection. About 1832 the present suspension bridge was erected by the neighbouring proprietors.² The point chosen was about twenty yards below the traditional site of the Thirteenth century bridge, and unfortunately the formation of a suitable approach involved the removal of the last remains of the old Hospital. Dr. Forbes says that "many human bones were disinterred, but no other article of curiosity." The excavations required for the approach road were of considerable depth and extent, and somewhat altered the appearance of the locality. Further alterations, by excavations and embankments, were made in 1858, when the railway passed along the Mulben ravine and crossed the Spey about eighty yards below the suspension bridge. Thus after the lapse of six centuries modern engineers selected the same site for crossing the river as had commended itself to the builders of the old bridge. The railway bridge has a span of 230 feet, and the suspension bridge a span of 235 feet. However humble, therefore, may have been the Thirteenth century structure, it was a bold undertaking even for the period that saw the rise of the stately edifice of Elgin Cathedral, and could command the services of men highly skilled in architecture.³

Little is known regarding the Hospital beyond what is contained in the eight charters preserved in the *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis*. The moving spirit of the undertaking seems to have been Andrew de Moravia, probably the greatest

¹ The name "Boat of Bridge," or "Boat o' Brig," probably preserves the tradition of the old bridge, but only indirectly. Robert Gordon of Strathloch, in his map of the Province of Moray in 1640, gives the name as "Overboat" (in contrast with "Netherboat," the ferry at Fochabers). In 1718 the name "Boat of Bridge" was in use; and by this time "Netherboat" was called "Boat of Bog," from the Bog of Gicht where Gordon Castle now stands. Upper Brig and Nether Brig were the older names of Bridgetown, and from these lands the ferry of "Overboat" became "Boat o' Brig."

² It may be mentioned that the mother of the President of this Society, who is still (1899) alive was the first woman to walk across the new bridge: the road-way had not been laid, and the passage was made on planks. She had driven up from Keith in company with Rev. James Thomson, then Minister of that parish.—J. C.

³ "The first erection of the bridge," Dr. Forbes says, "has been ascribed to the Romans in their progress under Severus, and it is known to have been in existence after the Reformation." It seems more probable to infer that the bridge had been erected not long before 1228, when King Alexander II. gave what is apparently the first grant for its preservation. A bridge, so unique and important in its position, would not have been left to take care of itself for so long a period as would be implied by a Roman origin. No authority is given for the second statement, and there is a probability that the bridge had become useless before the Reformation.

and best of the Bishops of Moray. He was a man of large enterprise, and fortunately, through his family connection, possessed the influence that enabled him to carry out the several laudable projects he had in hand at one time. His new cathedral was in course of erection, and he was engaged in providing additional canons to serve therein. Recognising that Elgin, as a cathedral city, would become a centre of greater attraction than hitherto, especially to the poor, he was making provision accordingly. Himself founding beside the city a *Domus Dei*, or *Maisondieu*, which was intended for the reception of the poor, he was obtaining further endowments for it. For the poor, travelling to his cathedral city, he sought to provide by securing the erection of a Hospital at the east end of the Bridge of Spey on the natural route to his cathedral from a large portion of his diocese. If we knew that the Well, with its Chapel of Our Lady of Grace, at Orton about two miles below the Bridge of Spey, had already attained somewhat of its subsequent celebrity for healing virtue, we should have an additional reason for the erection of a Hospital for poor pilgrims beside the Bridge of Spey.

Among the charters of gifts to the Hospital, the earliest seems to be that by King Alexander II., in which he gives the land of Robenfeld "for the support of the Bridge of Spey" (*ad sustentationem pontis de Spe*). This charter was granted at Elgin on 30th June 1228. The King desired that the guardian of the bridge who should be appointed by him and his Council should hold the said land for the purpose of upholding the bridge as should be found necessary (*volumus ut custos predicti pontis qui per nos et consilium nostrum pro tempore preficietur ad hoc predictam terram habeat custodiendam et de eadem terra ad commodum et conservationem ejusdem pontis sicut melius poterit disponat*). The occurrence of this charter among the Hospital charters recovered in 1391 shows that by that date the care of the bridge was entrusted to the Hospital; but from the guardian of the bridge being mentioned in this charter as if not specially connected with the Hospital, it may be inferred that the Hospital had not been built at the time when the charter was granted. Four years later, however, the Hospital was in existence. By a charter dated at Inverculan, on 7th October, 1232, the same King gave a grant of four merks annually out of the rent of the royal mills of Nairn "to God and the blessed Mary and the Chapel of S. Nicholas beside the Bridge of Spey for the support of a chaplain and a clerk serving in said chapel" (*Deo et beate Marie et capelle Sancti Nicholai juxta pontem de Spe, ad sustentationem capellani et clerici in dicta capella deservientium, quatuor marcas annuatim percipiendas de firma molendinorum nostrorum de Inuernarn*).

The Hospital itself was founded by Muriel de Polloc, Lady of Rothes, and the charter, which is not dated, was probably granted after 1228 but before 1232. She gave "to God and the blessed Mary and the blessed Nicholas her whole land of Inverorkel that there might be erected thereon a house for the reception of poor travellers" (*Sciant . . . me dedisse . . . Deo et beate Marie et beato Nicholao totam terram meam de Inuerorkel . . . in puram et perpetuam elemosinam ad habendum in ea domum ad receptionem pauperum transeuntium*). Bishop Andrew de Moravia was a witness of this charter, and also, among others,

Nicholas, vicar of Rothes, and Symon, vicar of Dundurkus. Nicholaus de Urcane was also a witness; perhaps *Urcane* should be read *Urtane*, and would then be the land (not far from the Bridge) now called *Orton*. On S. Nicholas' day (6 December) 1238 the same Lady of Rothes made further gifts to the Hospital, to which many poor persons were now resorting. She now gave the mill on the land of Inverorkel, with its pond and lade, just as they stood at the time of the making of the charter (*Sciant . . . me dedisse . . . hospitali Sancti Nicholai juxta pontem de Spe et in eodem loco servientibus et servituris, ad sustentationem pauperum ad idem hospitale confluentium, molendinum habendum in terra sua de Inuerorkell et stagnum habendum et aqueductum ad idem molendinum, sicut habuerunt tempore confectionis hujus carte et sicut melius ibidem habere poterunt*). By the same charter she also gave an additional portion of land on the east of the Hospital; which ground had its boundaries, from the Spey to the burn then called Orkel (*aquam que vocatur Orkel*), now called Mulben, marked by crosses, and was perambulated by the Lady in the company of the Bishop (*sicut ego, una cum venerabili patre domino Andrea Moraviensi episcopo, predictam portionem terre perambulavi*). Among the witnesses were Symon, parson of Dundurkus, and Hugh, vicar of Rothes. The same lady had already given to the Hospital "the church of Rothes with its pertinents." The original charter of this gift has not been preserved, but in 1235 a composition was agreed upon between the Hospital and the Priory of S. Andrews, which seemed to claim some right in the church of Rothes. By this composition the Hospital obtained full possession of the church of Rothes, paying, however, but only "as a mere gift" (*nomine simplicis beneficii*), three merks annually to the Priory. This gift was subsequently confirmed by Lady Muriel's daughter, Eva Morthach, also Lady of Rothes, by a charter witnessed by William, vicar of Dundurkus, Henry, chaplain of Rothes, and others. Bishop Andrew de Moravia also confirmed the gift, by granting a charter in which he formally gives to the Hospital "the church of Rothes with all its just pertinents in casualities, offerings, and all other ecclesiastical revenues lawfully belonging to it" (*ecclesiam de Rothes cum omnibus justis pertinentiis suis in obventionibus, oblationibus et omnibus aliis redditibus ecclesiasticis ad eam de jure spectantibus*).

Above the land of Inverorkel and also lying along the Spey was the land of Agynway (now Aikenway), extending to a davach; and this land (except the fishing of Spey pertaining to it) was given to the Hospital by Walter de Moravia, Lord of Boharm and Petty. Of this charter Bishop Andrew de Moravia was one of the witnesses, and as he was a cousin of the Lord of Boharm, his influence in securing the gift is apparent.

The Hospital buildings have now entirely disappeared, and no description of them is known to exist; but the contracted nature of the site would seem to indicate that they had never been of any great extent. Little can be said regarding those who served in the Hospital. A chaplain and a clerk are mentioned (as we have seen) in one of the King's charters. In the composition with the Priory of S. Andrews in 1235, the head of the Hospital is called "Rector"; and in a charter, undated, but about

1256, "Magister Ricardus, rector Pontis de Spe," appears as one of the witnesses.¹ The name of only one other officer has been preserved. "George, Earl of Rothes, having by the hand a discreet man, Sir Andrew Leslie, he presented him to John, Bishop of Moray, that he might be admitted to the chapel of the Hospital of S. Nicholas, near the Spey, whereof the Earl was patron. The Bishop gave collation to the said Andrew and put him in possession by delivering to him a ring—11th April, 1459."² This Andrew Leslie is, in 1471, styled, "Master of the Hospital of the Bridge of Spey" (*Andreas de Lesli, magister hospitalis pontis de Spey.*) Perhaps we may add the name of Gavin Leslie, rector of the church of Rothes, who was probably also Master of the Hospital about 1530, when he alienated to his friends its remaining possessions.

The fate of most of the endowments can be indicated. The situation of the land of "Robenfeld," given by the King, has not been ascertained. The King's grant of forty merks annually out of the royal mills of Nairn had apparently been afterwards increased; for by a charter, dated at Elgin on 10th June, 1471, Andrew Leslie, Master of the Hospital, sold to William de Calder of that Ilk, for forty shillings Scots annually, "the mill of Nairn, situated near the town of Nairn, with its toft and pertinents," (*molendinum de Narn, cum tofto et pertinenciis dicto hospitali pertinentibus, situatum prope villam de Narn.*)³

Muriel de Polloc was the daughter of Peter de Polloc, was Lady of Rothes, and married Walter Murdac or Murthac. Nothing further is known regarding this lady; but from her connection with Bishop Andrew de Moravia it may be conjectured that she was of the house of de Moravia, and that her mother may have been a daughter of one of the Lords of Boharm. She was succeeded by her daughter, Eva Morthach, who was still Lady of Rothes in 1263. How the Lordship of Rothes came into possession of the Leslies is not known, but in 1396 Sir George de Leslie was designated *Dominus de Rothes*, and in 1459 the Earl of Rothes was patron of the Hospital. George, first Earl of Rothes, had a son, George, to whom he gave the lands of Aikenway; and on 10th August, 1530, this George Leslie received a feu charter of these lands from Gavin Leslie, Rector of the church of Rothes. This George Leslie was the first of the Leslies of Aikenway, and the lands continued in possession of his descendants till 1699, when Margaret, Countess of Rothes, bought them from Beatrix Brodie, relict of Mr. William Leslie of Aikenway, and her daughters, Margaret, Christian, and Jane. In 1711 John, Earl of Rothes, sold Aikenway and other lands to John Grant of Elchies, and about 1758 these lands were bought by the Earl of Findlater. Before 1776 Aikenway was acquired by Col. Alexander Grant of Arndilly in Boharm; and it is now again conjoined with some of the lands possessed by the original donor to the Hospital, Walter de Moravia, Lord of Boharm.

¹ Fraser's *Chiefs of Grant*, vol. iii., p. 4.

² Col. C. Leslie's *Historical Records of the Family of Leslie* (Edin. 1859.)

³ *Book of the Thanies of Cawdor* (Spalding Club 1859.)

? About 1530 John Leslie, second son of George Leslie of Aikenway, married Margaret, daughter of Sir Recold Leslie, Vicar of Elgin. Her uncle was Gavin Leslie, Rector of the Church of Rothes, and he gave her husband "the lands of Bridge of Spey," evidently the same as the lands of Inverorkel. John Leslie died in 1591, leaving issue; and about that time the Laird of Grant, who already possessed the neighbouring lands of Mulben, acquired "the toun and lands of Brigton of Spey, ferry coble and stream-fishings thereof," and his descendants retained possession of them till about 1776, when these lands, with the lands of Mulben, were sold to the Earl of Findlater. On the death of James, Earl of Findlater and Seafield in 1811, these lands passed to Sir Lewis A. Grant of Grant, and they still remain in the possession of his representatives. ✓

Thus about 1530 the whole of the endowments of the Hospital were alienated and passed into lay hands; and it seems probable that there was no longer any bridge to preserve, and that the Hospital itself was in decay, if not altogether deserted.

Margaret Leslie, the last of the family of Aikenway, died in 1728, and left a £100 Scots to buy communion cups for the Parish of Dundorcas. The money was in the hands of her relative, William Leslie of Belnageith¹ near Forres, who raised legal difficulties regarding payment, and ultimately the Kirk-session of Dundorcas agreed to accept £85 Scots. Two silver cups were made by William Livingston, goldsmith in Elgin, at a cost of £89 8s Scots, and were produced to the Session on 4th August 1728, "with which the Session was very well pleased both as to workmanship and biggness." The cups are of beaker shape, weigh each twelve ounces, and bear, according to the will of the donor, this inscription, encircling each in two lines:—

THESE CUPS WERE GIFTED TO THE PARISH OF DUNDURKASS BY
MARGARET AND CHRISTIAN LESSLIES OF AKENWALL 1728

The Hospital was situated in the Parish of Dundorcas. This parish was suppressed in 1783, and one part (containing Aikenway) was added to Rothes, and the other part (containing Inverorkel) was added to Boharm. Each of these parishes now possesses one of Margaret Leslie's cups—all that the Church retains of the endowments of the Hospital of S. Nicholas beside the Bridge of Spey.

¹ This Mr. Leslie was the father of the Rev. William Leslie, minister of S. Andrews, Lhanbryde, near Elgin, who is still remembered in Morayshire for his wit and wisdom; he died 'Father of the Church,' 1839 at the age of 92. He had many family traditions of the last of the ladies of Aikenway, which he used to tell to my aunt.—J. C.

STEPHEN REE.