



THE ROYAL TOWN OF SUTTON COLDFIELD.

NOTES ON THE
PORTRAIT OF
BISHOP VESEY

presented

to the Town by

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T.D., C.C.

1937

BISHOP VESEY

The exact date of the Bishop's birth is a matter of doubt, but there is documentary evidence that points to the year 1464. He was a son of William Harman, a Sutton yeoman, and the reason for his adopting the name of Vesey is not known.

He entered Magdalen College, Oxford in 1482, where Thomas Wolsey, the famous cardinal was at that time a student, and it is not unlikely that Wolsey's influence helped Vesey in his early advancement. Both as a courtier and ecclesiastic he shewed great aptitude and talent. He was entrusted with several important embassies, and received many honours. In 1515 he was made Dean of Windsor and held the office of Warden of the Marches of Wales. He was appointed tutor to the Princess Mary, and in 1519, he was consecrated Bishop of Exeter. He read the Papal Bull at the investiture of Cardinal Wolsey and was one of the consecrators of Archbishop Cranmer. He attended King Henry at his meeting with the King of France on the Field of Cloth of Gold.

Whether on account of the religious changes and perplexities of the time or his great devotion to his native town, Vesey seems to have spent as much time at Sutton Coldfield as at Exeter. He built himself a mansion called Moor Hall, and according to Dugdale lived there in considerable state with a retinue of 140 men in scarlet caps and gowns.

His efforts for the welfare of his town were splendid and untiring and his benefactions were marked by singular wisdom and foresight. He built a Moot Hall and Market Place, fifty-one stone houses (some of which yet stand) and stone bridges at Curdworth and Water Orton. He added two aisles (or side chapels) to the church, beautified its interior and built an organ. He founded the Grammar School which bears his name, and bequeathed a meadow for the relief of poor widows, still known as Lord Meadow's Charity. He paved the whole town, and to prevent robberies on its borders he built a house on Cotty's Moor at a place called "Ruffian's Den" (now "Muffin's Den") in which he placed armed servants. In an endeavour to promote the useful employment of the people he introduced from Devon the trade of kersey making. As the inscription on his tomb records: "So great was his affection for his native place that he spared neither cost nor pains to improve it and make it flourish."

But the Bishop's most distinguished measure was his obtaining from King Henry VIII. a Charter containing the grant of the Chase and Manor of Sutton Coldefeld to be placed in trust for the benefit of the inhabitants of the town. The original Charter which is the most prized possession of the Corporation, also bestowed a form of government and the title of "Royal Town." Abbreviated extracts translated from the Latin, run: "Henry VIII. to our well beloved liege men, inhabitants and residents within our town, manor and lordship of Sutton Coldefeld, otherwise Sutton Colvyle or Coldefylde, grants that henceforth they be one body incorporated of one Warden and Society of the same town, manor and lordship for ever the town and village to be called the Royal Town of Sutton Coldefyld" . . . Know also that we have given and granted to the aforesaid Warden and Society and

Men Inhabitants our Chase and Park of Sutton Colfelde and also all and singular messuages, mills, lands, woods, and wastes with the pools and fishes in the same."

In 1550 Vesey resigned the See of Exeter to Miles Coverdale, his co-adjutor, but on the accession of Queen Mary to the throne she re-instated him. He died in 1555 at Moor Hall.

THE PICTURE

In 1928, to celebrate the 400th anniversary, of the granting of the Charter of Henry VIII, a Pageant, written by Alderman J. E. Willmott, in which the character of Bishop Vesey was prominently portrayed was performed in Sutton Park, and the interest that it aroused induced its author to write a play, entitled "Vesey," dealing with the Bishop's life and service to the Town. The performance of this play was an important feature of the celebration in Sutton Coldfield of the Silver Jubilee of King George V. in 1935, and Major F. Cresswell Hughes, who took a leading part in the production, determined to mark the occasion by presenting to the Town, in the form of a picture, a permanent and worthy memorial of its great benefactor.

No portrait of the Bishop is known to exist, and there is no record of his stature or appearance. In these circumstances, Major Cresswell Hughes commissioned Mr. Reginald Lewis, of Gunter Hall Studios, London, an artist who has had a wide experience of historical and decorative painting, to create a picture of the Bishop as he appeared to the artist's mind and as exhaustive research might inspire and assist.

This generous commission has resulted in a fine picture painted in the manner of the 16th Century which was hung "on the line" at the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1937, and attracted considerable attention.

The Bishop is shewn at the age at which he received the King's Charter, standing at an open window of his mansion of Moor Hall. He wears a cope, mitre, amice, an almuce of fur and a plain albe, this combination of vestments being that shewn on an Early 16th Century statue on Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster. In his left hand is a pastoral staff, hanging from which is the sudarium, a cloth to protect the staff from the moisture of the hand. Beneath this can be seen the maniple, a strip of material fringed at the ends, which hangs from the left arm. The cope is based on an actual cope of the period. x

x It is of 15th Century Italian velvet and cloth of gold; embroidered panels along the edge (orphrey) represent the Virgin and Child and Saints. The mitre, which in early times was a low cap became much higher during the centuries, and in the 16th Century had become very large and decorated. The amice around the neck is shewn worn over the fur almuce. The staff, usually of metal decorated with figures of saints and enriched with coloured enamels, should be noted. Decorative rings were worn over the gloves on thumb and fingers. In his right hand the Bishop holds the Charter, the 2nd seal of Henry VIII. hanging from it on a cord of the Tudor colours—green and white. Architecture and decoration were much influenced at this time by the Italian artists and workmen who came to England; hence the carved pilasters in the background with the cypher of Henry VIII.

Some References to the Vesey Portrait in Press Notices of the Royal Academy Exhibition

DAILY MAIL.

Early Flemings, Van Dyck, or Memling would appreciate the exquisite detail of Reginald Lewis's full length of Bishop Vesey in elaborate canonicals.

MORNING POST.

The elaborately painted portrait of Bishop Vesey is a creditable performance by Reginald Lewis.

EVENING NEWS.

Reginald Lewis's extraordinary tour de force, "Bishop Vesey."

DAILY TELEGRAPH.

Henry Lamb's "Sir Dan Godfrey" is as quick as a snapshot and should be compared with the microscopic detail of Reginald Lewis's "Bishop Vesey."

IRISH TIMES.

A charming composition "Bishop Vesey" by Reginald Lewis, is a magnificent painting of a prelate in wonderfully painted cope of red and gold. The detail is extraordinarily fine, and the material so finely done that it looks real.

SATURDAY REVIEW.

A fine portrait is that of "Bishop Vesey" in full canonicals by Reginald Lewis.

COUNTY EXPRESS.

A very fine painting of "Bishop Vesey" by Reginald Lewis in which the episcopal cope, stiff with gold and embroidery, contains some remarkable brushwork.

THE SPECTATOR.

Painters use different devices to stimulate interest. One is that of affected archaism . . . and in Reginald Lewis's "Portrait of Bishop Vesey," in which the appeal is to a late mediaeval Christian convention, it is at least appropriate.

BIRMINGHAM DAILY MAIL.

Midland interest is served by the highly finished full length "Bishop Vesey" painted by Reginald Lewis with a meticulous regard for detail.

BRITISH JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

Reginald Lewis has painted velvet and gold embroidered vestments with a truly amazing richness and fidelity in "Bishop Vesey." Verisimilitude of textures and surfaces may not be the artist's highest aim, but when it is done as well as in this example it is worthy of all praise for its craftsmanship.