St. John of Bletsoe.

By the Late John Brownbill.

J. H. Round, in an article on "The Families of St. John and Port" (*Genealogist*, N.S. XVI, 1), after exposing the fictitious character of the current account (as in Collin's *Peerage* and Burke) of the early history of the family, suggested that the Descent of the St. Johns of Instow in Devon might afford a clue. It was this same family which at one time or another held Instow, East Luccombe in Somerset and Fonmon (near Cardiff) in Glamorgan. The now available evidences are so scanty that no trustworthy pedigree can be constructed until Alexander de St. John is reached in the time of Edward II. Collins ignores this Alexander (or miscalls him John), but in the more accurate pedigree in the Bedfordshire *Visitation* (Harl. Soc.) of 1566, Alexander is stated to be son of John son of William de St. John of Fonmon, no suggestion being made of any connexion with either of the two older families of St. John of Stanton St. John (Oxon) and Langham (Surrey) and St. John (or Port) of Basing (Hants) and Halmaker (Sussex), families related by descent from Ralph lord of St. Jean-les Thomas (Marche). Round pointed out that it would be a great and perhaps unique distinction for the Bletsoe family if its descent could be traced from the St. Johns of Basing, as then they would have a descent in the male line from a great Domesday tenant—Hugh de Port of Basing.

It may be well to state what evidence there has been found on the matter, so that if readers of the *Genealogists' Magazine* can fill up the gaps, the *Complete Peerage*, when it reaches *St. John*, may be able to record the descent clearly.

1. First as to Glamorgan. The early Welsh tradition that this region was conquered by Robert FitzHamon and divided among his followers is discussed by G. T. Clark in his *Glamorgan Charters* (p. 655). Robert died in 1107, before the St. Johns were settled in England, and the Ports are not named among Robert's barons. Neither St. John nor Fonmon occurs in the Glamorgan feodary compiled c. 1262 (Clark, p. 650), nor in the extent made after the death of Joan, Countess of Gloucester, in 1307 (Cal. Inq. IV, p. 322) and Clark therefore supposes that the St. Johns, if settled in Glamorgan at that time were merely undertenants of the Umfravilles of Penmark. This seems probable, because Fonmon is a hamlet in the parish of Penmark, and the earliest St. John recorded in the district is a William de St. John who was first witness to a charter granted c. 1200 to Morgan Abbey by Henry son of Gilbert de Umfraville (Clark, p. 217). It is *possible* that this was the William de Port, who had assumed St. John as a surname as early as 1204; but there was a William in the Stanton family at the same time. No further evidence occurs till the appearance of a William de St. John as a witness (with other local men) to a charter at Usk in 1289

(Clark, p. 1205). He is reasonably identified with the William named in a grant by Richard Abell of Fonmon, chaplain, of a small piece of land to Henry de St. John, son of Sir William de St. John, Knight. This undated charter was taken " from the evidences of John lord St. John of Bletsoe " (Lansdowne MS. 860A, f. 287), and a Philip de St. John of whom nothing further is known, was among the witnesses. One Richard Abell, possibly the chaplain named, occurs among the prebendaries of Lichfield, c. 1312. This charter seems to have been the earliest of the Bletsoe family record, and the Sir William named in it headed the pedigree in the Visitation of 1566, as stated above, with sons Henry (s.p.) and John, brother and heir, who had a wife Beatrix. The next St. John of the family to occur in Glamorgan is Oliver de St. John in 1358. No evidence of descent appears in the local charters.

To prevent any mistake, it must be stated (by way of parenthesis) that in the Glamorgan County Court, held at Cardiff 3 August, 1299, John de St. John the younger and Roger his brother, as also a Hugh de St. John, were present.

These names belong to the Basing family, John the younger being summoned by that description to Parliament in 1299, during his father's lifetime. They were present however, not as local magnates but as members of the Earl of Gloucester's Council, sent down to decide a Dispute.

2. As to Devonshire.

In 1228 John de St. John, parentage unknown, acquired land in Ashleigh (*Devon Fines*, i, 86), and perhaps even earlier Peter de St. John attested an Exeter charter (Various Coll. Hist. MSS. Com., iv, 60). At Instow, a member of the honour of Gloucester, John de St. John, was lord in 1242/3 (*Book of Fees*, 779). (It is possible that the William of Glamorgan came in about this time, but there is no evidence). John de St. John was lord of Instow in 1296 (Pole), also in 1302/3 and 1316 (*Feudal Aids*), and Alexander is said to have been there about the same time (Pole). This Alexander was pardoned in 1321 for being an adherent of Roger Damory, one of the opponents of the Despensers (*Cal. Pat. R.*). It may be added that a Henry de St. John was instituted to the church of Doddiscombleigh, Devon, in 1309, and died in 1310 (*Stapledon's Registers*). It is possible, from the date, that he was the Henry of Fonmon. At any rate, where the evidence is so scanty it is worth noting that the same Christian name occurs in Devon and Glamorgan. Various families had estates in both counties, like the Umfravilles mentioned above.

Alexander de St. John presented to the church at Instow in 1337 (Grandison's Reg.) A Beatrix de St. John presented in 1346 (ibid), but if she was Alexander's mother, as in the pedigree of 1566, she must have been very aged. In 1340 Alexander de St. John and

Elizabeth his wife, in conjunction with Oliver de St. John and Elizabeth his wife, made a settlement of the manor of East Luccombe (*Somerset Fines*, ii, 206). Oliver's wife was sister and heir of John de Luccombe, who had died in 1334 when Elizabeth (then aged 13) was already Oliver's wife (*Cal. Inq.* vii, 595). How Alexander comes into the story of Luccombe is not so clear. He had had the wardship of the lands during the minority, and his wife is stated in the *Visitation* to have been daughter and co-heir of Henry de Umfraville of Penmark, a statement which seems confirmed by the fact that later the St. Johns had a moiety of Penmark. Clark, however (*Glam. Charters*, 443), professes himself uncertain as to how this moiety was obtained. From the later descent it would seem that Alexander had some right in Luccombe, probably by purchase.

The evidence at this period is given fully in Chadwyck-Healey's West Somerset, p. 65, so that there is no need to repeat it. It is quite clear that Oliver was the son of Alexander, for Henry, who (in accordance with the fine cited) succeeded to Luccombe was in the fine called son of Alexander, and in Oliver's Inq. p.m. was called brother of Oliver. The Oliver mentioned occurs in Glamorgan also in 1358 and 1359 (Clark, pp. 1298, 1422). He took part in the Crecy campaign, was lord of Instow and Luccombe (*Feudal Aids*) and presented to Instow church ; and was acting in various ways in Devon. By his first wife he had a son John, whose son was found to be illegitimate, and so Luccombe passed to Oliver's younger brother (as above), but it is interesting to notice that a stray Luccombe deed was still among the muniments of Lord St. John of Basing in the 18th Century (Lansdowne MS. 860A).

Chadwyck-Healey omits to notice that Oliver married for his second wife another Elizabeth, daughter (and apparently in her issue heir) of John Delabere of Marcross in Glamorgan, by whom he had a son John mentioned in 1371 (Lansdowne MS. 860A, f. 287). Oliver died in August, 1373. John de St. John presented to Instow in 1379 and 1387 (Brantingham's Register), but appears later to have sold Instow. On the other hand he seems to have succeeded to the other moiety of Penmark by failure of heirs to Elizabeth Blount, lady of the other moiety. In 1390 he had the misfortune to kill John de Hastings, earl of Pembroke, in a joust, being pardoned in 1391 (Walsingham : Cal. Pat. Roll). He had the favour both of Richard II and Henry V and was styled " King's Knight." He acquired an estate in Northampton by his marriage (c. 1395) with Isabel, daughter and heir of Sir John Paveley (or Pauly) of Paulerspury, and widow of another Sir John Paveley (Pat. R.). He died in 1424 (Inq. p.m.) having had a long and active career.

Oliver St. John is named as son of John and Isabel in 1403 (deed cited in Inq. p.m. I Hen. V. no. 55). In 1436 he was described as of Westpury, Northants, and Fonmon in Wales (Pat. R.). He is said by Collins to have died in 1437, being buried at Rouen. By

his wife Margaret, daughter of John Beauchamp, he acquired various estates, including Bletsoe. Margaret (born c. 1410) afterwards married John Beaufort, and became Duchess of Somerset, and mother of Margaret Countess of Richmond, whose son Henry Tudor, afterwards Henry VII, brought these St. Johns into close relations with the Court.

Oliver left two sons, John and Oliver, the latter being founder of the house of St. John of Lydiard Tregose. John was said to be aged 40 and more in the inquisition post mortem of his mother, the Duchess of Somerset, in 1482. From his mother's age he could scarcely have been so old as 50; the date of his father's death shows he must have been 45. The point is of some importance, because the John who died in 1559 is sometimes called his son and sometimes his grandson. The latter is the statement of the printed *Visitation* pedigree of 1566, already cited, which records: Oliver—son John—son John—son John—son Oliver, 1st lord St. John of Bletsoe. The dates are reconcilable with either descent, but there is no definite proof of the existence of the intermediate John, the name John seeming to go on without a break from 1482 to 1525 in the records. The John who died in 1559 is stated in his epitaph to have been brought up by the Countess of Richmond, who is described as *sui materlera alumni*, meaning apparently that she was his aunt. She was either his father's or his grandfather's half-sister, so that *materlera* is inexact in any case. Recent genealogists therefore seem to have come to the conclusion that there were only *two* Johns in succession; e.g., Harvey in *Willey Hundred*. The marriage attributed to the intermediate John is so unlikely on the face of it that it can scarcely be an invention; he is said to have married Alice daughter of Sir Thomas Bradshaigh of Haigh, in Lancashire. The John who died in 1525 left a son John aged 30 and more, and this John at his death in 1559 had a son and heir Oliver, likewise aged 30 and more, according to the inquisitions.

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