

CHAPTER VII.

RURAL DEANERY OF FINCHAM.

No precise time can be defined when the office of Rural Dean had its beginning in this country, but there is evidence for believing that it was in imitation of continental countries, about the end of the eleventh century. In the twelfth century subscriptions of Rural Deans to documents are by no means uncommon. A Rural Dean of Thetford is recorded by Blomefield in the year 1175, and soon after that time the institution was general. The appointment is generally in the Bishop, as in this diocese, and where it happens that the Archdeacon or clergy have a voice in the election, the Bishop has the power of a veto.¹

In the Diocese of Norwich the appointment formerly was by collation, which made it perpetual and for life ; it is now by commission, and during pleasure.

The Rural Deanery is generally coterminous with the Hundred. The Deanery of Fincham coincides with the Hundred of Clackclose, and comprehends 33 churches, there being two parishes having two churches each, and two with none.

The duties of the Rural Dean were anciently very extensive, including not only the visitation of churches, parsonage houses and schools, but also testamentary jurisdiction, and other ecclesiastical functions, now exercised only by the Bishop and Archdeacon, in their respective Courts.

The Rural Dean had originally his seal of office, in

¹ See *Horæ Decaniciæ Rurales*, by W. Dansey, M.A., vol. i, p. 116.

the proper use of which he was restricted by Canon Law. Blomefield says that all the Rural Deans of the Norwich diocese had their peculiar seals, several of which he had seen, but only two are described by him, viz., those of Norwich and Fincham. Of the latter he says : "I have now before me the probate of the will of Thomas Westhowe, of Boketon, (Boughton,) at Downham, dated Dec. 15th, 1413, and proved by Hugh Birdham, Dean of Fincham, to which is affixed an oblong seal of red wax ; the impress a bird, probably a finch, on a tree, and a star in chief, and this legend, SIGILLUM DECANATUS DE FYNCHAM, expressing both his own and his Deanery's name in that device."¹

The office had its own proper revenues up to the time of Henry VIII. In the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291 they are valued at xxx^s, but even this amount gradually diminished, until in 1536 the decanal income is stated in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* as follows :

"Decanatus de Fyncham.		
"Thomâ Oxburgh Decano.		
"Valet per annum		xiii ^s iv ^d .
"Decima inde		xvi ^d .

These emoluments we may suppose went the way of other ecclesiastical confiscations at this time.

DEANS OF FINCHAM.

1199. Galfridus,² witness to a deed, 1 John, at *Stow*.
 S. D. Hugh. "Hugone decano de Fyncham," circa Henry III, at *Stow*.³
 1308. Hugh de Swaffham, Rector of Barton St. Mary.
 1326. Edmund de Welle, collated by the Bishop of Norwich.

¹ *Hist. of Norfolk*, vol. ii, p. 227.

² *Dugdale Monast. Angl.*, vol. iii, p. 637.

³ In another deed, somewhat later, occurs as witness "Hugh *fratre* Decani ;" also, "Samson *filio* Decani de Fyncham," evidencing a married ecclesiastic.

1347. Richard de Norwich, by the same.
 1349. Matthew de Ashton, by the same.
 1349. Roger de Stalham, by the same.
 1350. Gilbert de Ashton, by the same.
 1377. William de Oxburgh, by the same.
 1383. Robert Takel, prebendary of Litchfield and Coventry.
 1389. John de Mundeford, collated, &c.
 1393. Hugh Birdham. Also Prior of Wirmegay.
 1429. Thomas Aspilyon, on the death of Birdham.
 1497. William Porteland, A.M., collated, &c.
 1501. John Aberfield. Also Rector of Great Cressingham.
 1518. Thomas Bilney, on the death of Aberfield.
 1535. Thomas Oxburgh, as appears from the *Val. Eccl.* quoted above.

From this time the office fell into disuse and decay. It has never been proscribed or interfered with by law. Its general revival was contemplated by Queen Anne, who committed the subject to Convocation, "to be debated and considered ;" but "discordancies and jealousies being the chief features of "that body, the project fell abortive to the ground."¹ Individual Bishops, however, have of late years at their discretion revived the office. Bishop Stanley did so in this diocese in 1842, and he says in his instructions to the Rural Deans, that it has been done "in 18 English dioceses since "the year 1800, and is recognised by the legislature in recent statutes." His object is "not to interfere with the jurisdiction "of the Archdeacons, but to assist them in some branches of "their duty, extremely onerous in this extensive diocese, "which contains 1038 parishes." The following have been appointed :-

1842. William Gale Townley, Rector of Upwell.
 " John Francis Edwards, Rector of Holme with. South Runcton.
 1846. William Joseph Parkes, Rector of Hilgay.
 1847. William Blyth, Rector of Fincham.

¹ *Horæ Dec. Rur.*, vol. ii, p. 172.