

## CHAPTER VI.

## ERITH AND LESNES.

"O'er eastward uplands gay or rude,  
 Along to Erith's ivied spire,  
 I start with strength and hope renewed,  
 And cherish life's rekindling fire ;  
 Now measure vales with staring eyes,  
 Now trace the churchyard's humble names,  
 Or climb brown heaths abrupt that rise,  
 And overlook the winding Thames."—BLOOMFIELD.

Situation of Erith, and Derivation of its Name.—Descent of the Manor.—A Saxon Law-Suit.—The Church.—The Town.—Census Returns.—Chapels and Schools.—Erith formerly a Maritime Port.—Historical Incidents.—The Pier and Public Gardens.—Discoveries of Geological Remains.—Erith Marshes.—Powder Magazines.—Explosion of a Magazine.—Belvedere.—The Royal Alfred Institution for Aged Merchant Seamen.—The Village of Belvedere.—Abbey Wood.—Lesnes Abbey.—Bostall Heath.

SUCH are the terms in which the self-taught poet, Robert Bloomfield, wrote of this neighbourhood, when, suffering in health, he was spending some months at Shooter's Hill, whence he would walk along the high grounds to Erith, taking one of his favourite rambles. Erith, or Eareth, as it was sometimes called, is the next parish eastward from Plumstead, having the river Thames for its northern boundary. It is about three miles across either way, and nearly one-half of it consists of marsh land. From the marshes and the village the ground rises somewhat steeply towards the west, where the woody heights of Belvedere form a beautiful background to the view, as seen from the river, the church nestling pleasantly at its base.

According to Ireland's "History of Kent," the place was formerly called Lesnes, otherwise Erith. The former name was, as Lambarde thinks, mis-spelt by the Normans, instead of the Saxon word *Leoves*, which signifies pastures; "but," continues the writer, "we rather conjecture it to be derived from the old British word *lese*, pastures, and *ness*, a promontory, or cape, both names being suited to the different parts of this parish—the former to the western, and the latter to the eastern portion. It was written in old records *Alienes*; in the *Textus Roffensis*, *Lisna*; and in Domesday, *Loisnes*. The name of Erith, or Er-ythe, seems to be derived from the Saxon word *ære hythe*, that is, the *old haven*." Dr. Morris, in his "Etymology of Local Names," suggests *E-rith*, a "water channel," as the origin of the name; whilst Taylor, in his "Words and Places," gives it as *ora*, a shore, and *hythe*.

The manor was one of those seized by the Conqueror, and given to Odo his half-brother. In the thirteenth century we find it in the possession of the family of Badlesmere, from whom it passed to Roger Mortimer, Earl of March; it afterwards reverted to the Crown, and was given by Henry VIII. to Elizabeth Countess of Shrewsbury. During the lifetime of the countess the manor and

estate appears to have been settled on her only daughter Anne, wife of William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, who died without issue, and on her death in the thirty-first of Elizabeth, the property descended to her only son by her first husband, Peter Compton. With this family it remained till towards the end of the seventeenth century, when it was sold by Sir Thomas Compton to a Mr. Lodowick. After one or two other changes of ownership, the manor subsequently passed, about the middle of the last century, to the Wheatleys, with whom it has since continued. Mr. William Wheatley, the second of the family who possessed the property, built a new manor-house on Northumberland Heath, in the upland or southern portion of the parish, where it joins on to Crayford.

Within the walls of the venerable parish church, if tradition may be trusted, a meeting was held in the reign of John between the king's commissioners and a party of the discontented barons, having for its object the arrangement of a treaty of peace, so that it is just possible it was here that the first discussion of the famous Magna Charta took place.

Erith was the scene of another important event, which took place nearly a century preceding the Conquest, when England was governed by the simple forms of Saxon law. Lambarde appears to have been the first to bring the circumstances to light from the hoary documents of long-forgotten ages. Here is the story, as told by the "Kentish Perambulator":—"The narrative of a thing done at this place by Dunstane, the Archbishop of Canterbury, almost a hundred yeeres before the coming of William the Conqueror.—A rich man (saith the text of Rochester) being owner of Cray, Eareth, Ainesford, and Woldham, and having none issue of his body, devised the same lands (by his last will, made in the presence of Dunstane and others) to a kinswoman of his owne for life, the remainder of the one halfe thereof, after her death, to Cristes-church at Canterbury, and of the other halfe to Saint Androwes of Rochester, for ever. He