XX.—*On the Mantle and the Ring of Widowhood.* By HENRY HARROD, Esq.
F.S.A.

Read February 16th, 1865.

SIR HARRIS NICOLAS printed in the *Testamenta Vetusta* an Abstract of the Will of the Lady Alice West of Hinton Marcel, widow of Sir Thomas West, dated in 1395, and proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury.^a

In this will occurs a remarkable bequest which the learned editor found himself quite at a loss to explain. She bequeathed to her son Thomas, amongst other things, “a ring with which I was yspoused to God.”

Sir Harris rightly says, this could not have been her marriage ring, and it was clear she had not entered a convent. This is still more clearly made out by a reference to the transcript of the will in the registers of the Prerogative Court. It will there be seen she exercised complete control over her property, real and personal, and she makes this will at “the Lord’s Inn of Chertlton without Newgate, in the parish of Saint Sepulchre, in the suburb of London.

Gough, in his *Sepulchral Monuments*,^b quotes a story from Matthew Paris, of one Cecily Sandford, a lady of condition, who on her deathbed, having passed through the usual forms with her confessor, and he ordering her attendants to take off a gold ring he observed on her finger, she, although just expiring, recovered herself enough to tell them she would never part with it, as she intended to carry it to heaven with her into the presence of her celestial spouse in testimony of her constant observance of her vow, and to receive the promised reward. She had it appears made a vow of perpetual widowhood, and with her *wedding* ring assumed the russet habit, the usual sign of such a resolution. It is

^a Register Rous, 29.

^b Vol. i. p. cxix.

added that she was honorably interred in St. Alban's Abbey Church, in a stone coffin, before the altar of St Andrew, on account of her vow and her rank.

In the "Colchester Chronicle," portions of which are printed in Cromwell's History of Colchester, one entry appears to confirm the conjecture that the whole was composed in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, "Anno Dni cciiij Helena mortuo Constancio perpetuam vovit viduitatem."

From a careful inspection of the registers at Doctors' Commons it is abundantly clear that the custom extensively prevailed in the middle ages of widows taking a vow of chastity and receiving a peculiar robe and ring. It was this latter, no doubt, that Lady Alice West gave her son; it could hardly have been her wedding ring, as will, I think, be established by some of the following extracts.

By the testament of Katharine Rippelingham,^a dated 8th February 1473, who calls herself "advowes," she desires to be buried in the church of Baynardes Castell of London, where she was a parishioner, and by her will, in which she gives herself the title of "widow advowes," she shows herself in the full exercise of her rights of property, devising estates, carrying out awards, and adjusting family differences, and in an undated codicil she bequeaths to her daughter's daughter, Alice Saint John, "*her gold ring with a diamante sette therein wherewith she was 'sacrid.'*"

Sir Gilbert Denys, knight, of Syston,^b 1422:—

"If Margaret my wife will after my death vow a vow of chastity, I give her all my moveable goods, she paying my debts and providing for my children; and, if she will not vow a vow of chastity, I desire my goods may be distributed or divided into three equal parts, &c."

John Brakenbury^c in 1487 leaves his mother certain real estate "with that condicion that she never mary, *the which she promised afore the parson and the parish of Thymmylbe*; and, if she kepe not that promise, I will she be content with that which was my fader's will, which she had every peny."

William Herbert, knight, Lord Pembroke,^d in his will, dated 27th July 1469, thus appeals to his wife, "And, wife, that ye remember your promise to take the order of widowhood, as ye may be the better maistres of your owen, to perform my will, and to help my childern, as I love and trust you."

William Edlington, esquire, of Castle Carlton, on the 11th June 1466, says in his will, "I make Christian my wife my executor upon this condicion, that she

^a Register Watts, 114.

^c Register Milles, 43.

^b Register March, fo. 424.

^d Register Godyn, 228.

take *the mantle and the ring* soon after my decease; and, if case be that she will not take the mantle and the ring, I will that William my son (and other persons therein named) be my executors, and she to have her third part of all my goods moveable."

Lady Joan Danvers,^a in 1453, gives the ring of her profession of widowhood to the image of the crucifix near the north door of St. Paul's.

And Lady Margaret Davy,^b widow, in 1489, leaves her profession ring to our Lady of Walsingham.

Many more extracts might be added, but there is sufficient here to establish the fact of the extensive prevalence of the custom, and to satisfy every one that the mysterious bequest of Lady Alice West indicates that she too had taken the vow of chastity, and that the ring she left her son was not her wedding-ring, but the ring of her profession of widowhood, the ring with which she was "espoused to God."

Gough prints the Act of Court from the Ely Registers, on the taking the vow by Isabella Countess of Suffolk in 1382. This took place at the priory of Campsey, in the presence of the Earl of Warwick, the Lords Willoughby, Scales, and others. The vow was as follows: "Jeo Isabella, jady's la femme William de Ufford, Count de Suffolk, vowe a Dieu, &c. en presence de tres reverentz piers en Dieu evesques de Ely et de Norwiz, qe jeo doi estre chaste d'ors en avant ma vie durante." And the Bishop of Ely, with authority of the Bishop of Norwich, (in whose diocese Campsey was,) received and admitted the same "et mantellum sive clamidem ac annulum dicte voventis solempniter benedixit et imposuit super eam."^c

Dugdale, in his history of Warwickshire and in his Baronage, prints a licence from John Bishop of Lichfield to one N. N., to administer the vow of chastity to Margery, widow of Richard Middlemore, who died 15th Henry VII., which contains this passage: "In signum hujusmodi continentie et castitatis promisso perpetuo servando eandem Margeriam velandam seu peplandam habitumque viduitatis hujusmodi viduis, ut præfertur, ad castitatis professionem dari et uti consuetum cum unico annulo assignandum."^d

Dugdale also prints an Act of Court on the vow being taken by Philippa, sometime the wife of Sir Guy of Warwick, on the 9th of August, 1360, in

^a Register Stockton, 85.

^b Register Milles, 168.

^c Gough, vol. I. p. cxix. who quotes Register Fordham, Bishop of Ely. fo. 39 b.

^d Dugdale's Warwickshire, p. 895.

the collegiate church of the Blessed Mary of Warwick, which vow ran thus :
 “ En le nom de la Seint Trinite, Piere et Fitz et Seint Esprit, jeo Philippe, que
 fu la feme Sire Guy de Warwick, face purement et dez queor et volonteé entiere-
 ment avow a Dieu et Seint Eglise et a la benure Virgin Marie et a tout la bele
 compaignie celestine et a vous reverend piere en Dieu Sire Reynaud, per la grace
 Dieu Evesque de Wyrcestre, que jeo ameneray ma vie en chastitée desore en
 avant, et chaste sera de mon corps a tout le temps de ma vie.”^a

A good specimen of the form of the mantle of the professed widow may be
 seen in the brass of Lady Joan Braham, Frenze, Norfolk, dated 1519; she is de-
 scribed in the inscription as “vidua ac Deo dicata.” It is engraved in Cotman’s
 Brasses, vol. i. 53. Among the drawings collected by the late Mr. Dawson
 Turner, illustrative of Blomefield’s History of Norfolk, (now in the British
 Museum,) is one of a brass in Witton Church, Norfolk, representing an elderly
 female in wimple and mantle, with the following inscription :—

Orate p’ a’i’a d’ne Juliane Angell
 Potricis cui’ a’i’e p’piciet’ De’.

^a Dugdale’s Warwickshire, p. 399.