

CHARTERS UNEARTHED AFTER 120 YEARS

Important Discovery At Huntingdon

A RUSTY SAFE GIVES UP ITS SECRET

A most important historical discovery was made, in dramatic circumstances, at Huntingdon on Sunday, when two men—wearing their oldest clothes—unearthed, in a room full of musty documents, a rusty iron safe.

With the aid of a pair of tongs, they prised up the lid—and there, to their intense astonishment, were the originals of 17 Huntingdon charters, which had been lost for about 120 years.

Other valuable documents—including the foundation charter of Huntingdon Grammar School and some papers which show that Fenstanton was apparently a Royal Manor in the 13th century—came to light in the course of the search, which took place at the office of the Town Clerk (Mr. J. W. Winter). The oldest charter which was found was a King John one, dated 1206, and this definitely proves Huntingdon to be an older borough—by seven years—than Godmanchester.

The discovery was made by Mr. P. G. M. Dickinson, F.R.A.S., who does not consider himself a "Huntingdon man" at all. He has been at the Huntingdon branch of the Westminster Bank for three years, and during that time he has investigated the buildings and history of both Huntingdon and Godmanchester, which he considers two of the most interesting towns, historically, he has yet seen.

MONTHS OF RESEARCH.

Many months of research have resulted in a very important discovery, for very few of our county towns have their original series of charters intact. Huntingdon has always been a borough, as far as it is possible to know now, and is mentioned as such in Domesday Book. The first charter, dated Aug. 7th, 1206, is very unusual as it has been repaired by remounting. It is not in as good a condition as Godmanchester's first charter—1213—and generally speaking, the condition of all the early Huntingdon charters is not as good as those of Godmanchester. Most of them have been repaired, and it appears they must have been handled considerably.

Mr. Dickinson told the "Post" the full story of the discovery in an interview at his home in Hartford-road, Huntingdon, on Monday.

"The story really begins at Salisbury in 1928, when I was working in the branch of the bank there," he said. "There I met Mr. F. J. Crabb, of Inland Revenue, and when I came to Huntingdon three years ago, I met Mr. Crabb again. He knew my interest in history and so on, and he got me to give lectures at various places in the county. Soon after I gave my recent talk to Huntingdon Men's Fellowship, things began to happen.

"Everybody was saying Godmanchester has got their charters, Huntingdon has not. There was nothing on record to show that the charters of the county town had been destroyed. The Victoria County History of 1932 said that none of the originals appear to have been in existence in 1932, though they seemed to have been in existence at the beginning of the 19th century.

"The 'Hunts. Post' kindly printed my letter asking for information on the subject, and I got numerous suggestions and offers of help.

THE VITAL CLUE.

"Mr. A. Gery Dawson, manager of the Westminster Bank, gave me the first real line I could go on, and I am also indebted to Mr. C. D. Lamb, Mr. Goodes, manager of the Freeman, and Mr. Barry Brudenell, who gave me the vital clue that finally led me to the charters. Mr. Brudenell said that when he was a clerk in Messrs. Maule and Sons' office, Huntingdon, about 35 years ago, he saw documents, with seals, that might have been charters.

"I made many other inquiries, and I have been surprised at the number of people who have shown interest in this subject and offered help.

"Mr. Goodes told me the charters were quite possibly in existence in 1885. So I looked over the Town Hall as a preliminary. I found nothing there, which was not surprising, as Mr. Lamb had examined it at the beginning of the war.

"A fortnight ago Mr. B. Needen asked if it was possible to arrange an exhibition of documents for War Weapons Week. I took my information to the Mayor. Really, I thought there might be something of interest for exhibition but not dreaming I should make such a discovery. I thought the charters might be in the Town Clerk's office if they were anywhere at all—but the actual finding was a great surprise. On Saturday the Mayor told me he had got permission for me to go to the office of Mr. J. W. Winter, the Town Clerk."

THE DRAMATIC STORY.

Mr. Dickinson grew excited as he told the dramatic story of the finding of the documents.

"At 10.30 yesterday morning I went with Mr. F. J. E. Dyer, one of Mr. Winter's clerks, to the office. We wore our oldest clothes and took an electric fire with us. First we found a few ancient documents, then we found an old tin box. The lid, which was not firmly fixed, had been used for the dumping of rubbish. We examined it and soon came across a most interesting series of charters and other documents relating to the manor of Fenstanton-cum-Hilton, dating from about the 13th century. It appears to have been a Royal Manor during part of its existence, and it seems to me that this may turn out to be even more interesting than the documents concerning the county town.

"This made us very excited, and we went on to find the manor rolls, and documents relating to the manors of Warboys, Stukeley, Brampton and Milton, near Peterborough.

"At one o'clock we had to adjourn for a bit. We were both very dirty and hungry. Mr. Dyer was very interested, and we renewed our search at 2.15.

"We shouldn't have found the charters then if it had not been for a pair of tongs. We found an old iron safe, very much hidden up. As we could not move it, we had to clear everything away from it. The lock and fittings were too rusty to move, but the hinges at the back were damaged, and Mr. Dyer produced a pair of tongs to prise up the lid.

"There, lying on the top, to our intense astonishment, was the county town's governing charter of 1630. We were tremendously excited, and shook hands over the charter there and then. It is the most important charter in Huntingdon's history, and was in operation until 1835."

Mr. Dickinson said that he had not yet had time to go very carefully into the documents.

"I want you to understand that I have so far been able to give these documents only a very cursory glance," he said, "but I went on to find what is apparently a complete series of charters from King John's of 1206 to King James II of 1686.

"Then there is a great mass of historical data which I have not had time to examine yet. I found an early 16th century document which refers to the Hospital of St. John, and is apparently the Foundation Charter of Huntingdon Grammar School.

"When we have sorted all this stuff out, we shall find we have the real history of Huntingdon."