

A GLIMPSE OF ROMSEY ABBEY IN THE LATE 13th CENTURY.

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AFTER a rather nebulous start some 50 years earlier, Romsey Abbey was refounded and endowed as a Benedictine Nunnery in 966 by King Edgar the Peaceful, and was now after 300 years at the height of its apparent prosperity.

It contained about 100 nuns, the number for which, according to a tradition recorded by Peter de Langtoft, who died early in the 14th century, it had originally been established. It was in the charge of an abbess and a prioress. The number of nuns in 1333, for which year we have a complete nominal roll, was 91, but this was some few years after a visitation by Bishop Woodlock, who had complained that the number of nuns at that date, 1311, was too great.

The association of the Abbey with royalty which had been so close in Norman times had been continued. In the reign of Rufus the Saxon princess, Christina, sister of Edgar the Atheling and of Margaret, Queen of Scotland, was a nun here, and her two nieces, Mathilda and Mary, the daughters of Queen Margaret, were pupils in the convent.

In 1155, King Stephen's daughter, Mary, was Abbess of Romsey; until she was snatched away as a valuable heiress by King Henry II and married to a foreign prince.

King John, who had found a nurse for his daughter Johanna in Romsey, paid several visits to the town and built here the well-known Hunting Box, which is still standing, and which was afterwards given by his son Henry III to the Abbey, to be used as a guest house.

King Edward I is known to have paid two visits to the Abbey in 1275 and in 1306. It was on the occasion of the second visit that the presence of members of his court was recorded by the scratching of their coats of arms on the plaster wall of the upper chamber of King John's house.

The story of the building of the Abbey church has unfortunately no written record, and can only be deduced from internal architectural evidence.

It is generally agreed, however, that it must have been begun in the reign of King Henry I, about 1120, and, after many checks and delays, completed in the latter half of the 13th century, perhaps in time to have its final dedication in the presence of King Edward at the time of his first visit, though there is no historical record of this.

The Abbess from 1268 to 1298 was Alicia Walerand, who belonged to a family of considerable importance. The Walerands were closely allied with the Earls of Salisbury. Her father, William Walerand, had married Isabella, the heiress of Lord Hugh de Kilpek, who possessed an estate of that name in Herefordshire.

The Walerands had provided a previous abbess for Romsey in 1199, a Mathilda Walerand, or as she was more often described as Mathilda Patric.

It was about the year 1284, when Alicia had been abbess about 18 years and when she must have been at least 40 years old, that John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury, thought it necessary to make a personal Visitation to the Abbey, the account of which is contained in two letters which are among those in the collection of his correspondence.

Fr. John Peckham became Archbishop of Canterbury in the year 1279. After leaving Oxford in 1250, he spent twenty years in Paris where he was closely associated with the two great Friar Saints, Bonaventura, belonging to his own Order of Franciscans, and Thomas Aquinas of the Dominicans, and took an important part in the disputations between the two Orders.

He was nominated to the archbishopric by Pope Nicholas III, and from his keen support of the temporal power of the Pope he soon came into conflict with King Edward I, who had been none too pleased with his appointment.

As a Friar, with a burning zeal for Church reform, he looked with no lenient eye upon the abuses and corruption which had crept into the institutions of the older monastic Orders, and determined to do what he could to reform them.

With this intent he firmly maintained his right as Archbishop to make personal visitations to any of the monasteries, in whatever diocese they might be situated, a duty which normally belonged to the diocesan bishop.

And so Peckham came to Romsey, probably making a visit to Hyde Abbey, in Winchester, on the same occasion. The date of the visitation is not known as the letters dealing with it are undated, but it was probably about 1284 or a little earlier.

The bishopric of Winchester was vacant between the death of Nicholas of Ely in 1280 and the appointment of John of Pontoise in June 1282. If the visitation took place before the latter date, it would be the duty of the archbishop to act while the see was vacant, but if after, he would be acting in accord with his general claim. There is no reference to the bishop in the letters, except with regard to his power of absolution and the authority given to members of the convent to appeal direct to himself if the bishop did not enforce his injunctions.

The *Letters of Peckham* are published in three volumes of the Rolls Series, and four letters only deal with Romsey. Two, D. VII and D. VIII, in Vol. II, refer to the visitation. Letter VII gives a very detailed account of his findings and consequent injunctions; VIII, a translation of most of which is published in Liveing's *Records of Romsey Abbey* is more in the form of a homily and suitable for publication as general instructions for the management of a convent.

Though the letters do not contain any account of the evidence he obtained from individuals in his visitation, it is clear that he must have made a fairly exhaustive enquiry and obtained a pretty accurate idea of the condition of the Abbey at the time of his visit. He makes no specific charges of immorality against individuals, but from his general injunctions it is evident that he was of opinion that there was considerable moral laxity in the convent and that he did not trust the abbess very far.

At some period in her career, scandal had not spared Abbess Alicia herself, though no reference is made to this in the archbishop's letters. Some years later it was alleged that she was the mother of Alan de Plugenet, who succeeded his grandfather, William Walerand, to the estates of Kilpek, his father being Andrew de la Bere. His legitimacy was in fact disputed in court, and a claim was made in 1309-10 to the estates by the children of Cecilia, a sister of Alice Walerand.

The court decided that Alicia, the abbess, was not the mother, but that Alan was the son of another daughter of William Walerand, also called Alicia, who was lawfully married to Andrew de la Bere.

The scandal was reopened fifty years later, when the Crown claimed property which would devolve on the descendants of Andrew de la Bere if his marriage was legal. The justices again decided that it had been legal and that there were two sisters, daughters of William Walerand, both named Alicia.

And so the good name of Alicia, Abbess of Romsey, was cleared in law. But it remains a strange fact that there should have been two Alicias in one family.

It is evident moreover that John Peckham did not trust Abbess Alicia very far in the care of the morals of her nuns, and distinctly imputes danger in any association between them and her nephew, Robert Walerand, the son of her brother William.

The scandal was revived once again in the 16th century by the antiquary, Gerard, who professed to have found details of it in an old manuscript from which he quotes.

The letters make it clear that there was considerable laxity also in the business administration of the abbey. The Abbess seems to have been in the hands of an unsatisfactory steward, and partly by personal extravagance and partly no doubt by mismanagement

had allowed the finances of the abbey to get into such a condition that on occasions there had been actual shortage of provisions.

The rent-roll of the abbey in 1412 was £404. 6s. 4d., about £6500 of present-day money, and there is no reason to suppose that it was proportionally less in Alicia's time.

This should have been an ample sum to maintain the establishment if there had been no extravagance and mismanagement and if the abbess had not taken too large a proportion of it for the maintenance of her personal establishment. The entertainment of the King must have been a heavy expense.

Translations of the two letters are here set forth, No. VII in extenso and No. VIII only where different points are raised or the same matter in different form.

The other two letters in the Peckham collection which concern Romsey are dated August 11th, 1286, and deal with the misbehaviour of one of the Prebends, Master William Schyrlok, who had to be forbidden entrance to the abbey or its precincts.

They will be found in Vol. III of the *Registrum*.

Register Epistolarum of Archbishop John Peckham.

Vol. II, p. 658, D. VII.

Brother John, by divine permission humble minister of the church of Canterbury, Primate of all England, to our beloved daughters in Christ, the Abbess and Convent of Romsey, Salutation and Benediction.

Lately, while carrying out the duties of a Metropolitan Visitation with you, we found among you some disquietude of heart, which was generally said to have been aroused by your faults, beloved daughter Abbess.

Wishing however, as far as we can in our duty to God, to entrust the remedy of the dissensions to you yourself, with the counsel of discrete men, we have laid down the following, which we firmly direct to be observed.

Firstly, we wish your good sense to recognise that you are not the "Mistress" of the properties of the community, but the "Steward" only, and the Mother of your College, which is the proper interpretation of the name "Abbess."

We wish therefore, that, dismissing from henceforth all stepmotherly bitterness, you study to attach to yourself the hearts of your daughters, chastising their faults after the manner of a mother, imagining no enmity to yourself and in all religious fasts and vigils presenting yourself to them as the mirror of religion; and that you follow out the "Master Rule"¹ as you are bound.

We straitly charge you to study to deal with all the major affairs of the house in association with the Convent. By major affairs we mean those which may involve important expenditure in either temporal or spiritual matters, among which we wish to include the appointment of the Steward; directing for the peace of the College that H. de Chalfehunte, whom you have long maintained in the office of Steward, contrary to the wishes of the Convent, shall not henceforth concern himself with that or any other office of the monastery.

We straitly charge and command the same with regard to John le Prikiere. But both of them may look out for posts elsewhere after having rendered an account of their offices in the presence of Master Philip, the official whom we have appointed our deputy in this matter.

¹ The Benedictine Rule.

In other respects, in association with at least twelve senior ladies, you may deal with all minor affairs of the church, in accordance with "the Rule."

And because you are said to have acted much according to the dictates of your own will, we attach to you three coadjutors of praiseworthy testimony, namely the ladies, Margery de Verdun, Philippa de Stokes and Johanna de Rovedoune, without whose advice and consent you will not venture to attempt any regulation for the convent pertaining to matters temporal or spiritual. And whenever, in an important matter, you shall wittingly have acted to the contrary, then you will know that you have been suspended from your office of administration.

And we call the appointment of manor officials and obedientiaries within the convent an important matter, or the punishment of delinquents, or the alienation of property by gifts or presents or by any other means whatsoever; also the discharge of nuns, the association of those that depart, the initiation of litigation or church business of any kind.

And if any of the three happen to be sick or absent, in their place you will accept Lady Letitia Montgomery or Lady Johanna Fleming or Lady Agnes Lydyerd; these others being called upon as required to make up the aforementioned number.

And whenever it may be necessary for you to go out for the business of the Church you will always take with you the aforesaid three ladies whom we have attached to you as coadjutors whether for the external or internal management of the monastery.

And if at any time you may go out for recreation, there shall always be two with you; so nevertheless that you undertake no business arrangements without three.

And because that in times past the whole convent is said, owing to your very great lack of consideration, to have been brought to poverty while you were entertaining sumptuously in your chamber, we direct that whenever the Convent is short of food and drink or the necessary pittances, you, as a mother sympathising with your daughters, shall dine in convent; and on such days it shall not be lawful for anyone to feed in your chamber; but all guests, of whatsoever condition they may be, secular or religious, shall dine in Common Hall and not within.

And at other times too, as far as your weakness permits, you will follow the College, especially at Matins and at Chapter, you who by your office, will have to answer for individual souls at the dread day of judgement.

Take care therefore that you do not scandalize them by your manner of life. But let your Chamber manifest such propriety that no suspect person frequent it.

Let there be no ape there, nor any number of dogs; nor will you maintain more than two secular maidservants.

And on account of the notorious enormity of the offences he has committed, we forbid Robert Walerand, under penalty of greater excommunication if he dare attempt the contrary, ever henceforth to dare to enter the precincts of the monastery, or any house or court within the gates of the monastery.

And if, at the devil's instigation, he does the contrary, we forbid any bell to be rung or mass to be celebrated, or the office of hours to be performed with chanting, while he is there.

Under the same penalty of excommunication we forbid him knowingly to enter any manor of the church or any other place in which there may be a nun of the monastery.

Wishing it to reach his notice and that of all other committers of sacrilege that, with the counsel and assent of our suffragans, we have, by statute here published, excommunicated all corruptors of nuns, reserving the power of absolving sacrilege of this kind to diocesans alone.

And we charge all you daughters of the College to respect your abbess more diligently, refraining from murmurings and calumnies, that your mother who is solicitous for you all, be not distressed.

Above all, we straitly charge you the abbess and the whole convent, under penalty of greater excommunication which will be incurred by those who deliberately do the contrary, that no one make enquiries concerning the person of one who is accusing herself or another ; secondly, that no one in such matters, whether bidden to do so or not, shall have to answer for making an accusation at our metropolitan visitation ; thirdly, that if the accuser should chance to become known or be suspected, no harm in word or deed shall be done to her nor be caused to be done to her by any other, male or female.

And absolution from the sentence which those incur who do the contrary in these three cases, we reserve to ourselves and to our commissioner, specially deputed for this according to the tenor of these presents.

But if, and may it so not happen, this our ordinance is too little observed either in whole or in part, it shall be lawful for the aforesaid coadjutors or others of the convent, by reason of this, to despatch a special messenger to the Winchester official whom we have appointed in our place as executor of these premises, or to the bishop himself. And if they are negligent or remiss in carrying out their duties in connection with the observation of the aforesaid, the matter is to be referred to us.

We commit the care of this letter to the aforesaid three coadjutors that they cause it to be read in Chapter once every month.

Register Epistolarum of Archbishop John Peckham.

Vol. II, p. 661, D. VIII.

Brother John, by divine permission humble minister of the church of Canterbury, Primate of all England, to our beloved daughters in Christ, the Abbess and Convent of Romsey, salutation, grace and benediction.

In a garden of lilies, the bridegroom pastures pleasantly and specially delights in gathering lilies before other flowers. It is necessary therefore that the garden, like the Lord's paradise, should be protected with the cherubic industry and the flaming sword of a wise and austere discipline lest entry lie open to it for the serpent or other seed-bed of corruption, by which the delight of the bridegroom be turned to displeasure or lesser satisfaction.

This lily we believe to be the heavenly and angelic ornament of complete virginal purity, which, by reason of certain things we found at our recent metropolitan canonical visitation, we wish to protect for ever with a full guardianship of regulations.

First then, the abbess for the time being shall choose for herself a discrete committee, changing the associates every year, so that the truth of her discretion may be made known by many witnesses and that she may always remember to hold herself and be so held by all, requiring consolation, as the mother of her college, as much as a secular mother is held by her daughters of the flesh.

Let her therefore ever be anxious to attract to herself the sincere affection of all, without distinction, and so generally conduct herself to all with such a sound honesty as to avoid any appearance of partiality.

She should above all recognise that she is not the mistress of the community's goods, but only performs the duty of dispenser. An abbess should therefore abstain from living sumptuously especially when the convent is hard up. And when there is a shortage of food or drink, or the necessary pittance, the abbess, like a mother, should show that she truly sympathises with her daughters and, except for reasons of definite sickness, should dine in convent, the table in times like these, being totally suspended in her private chamber. And any guests there may be should take their meals in common hall.

The abbess is not to appoint the steward or the other bailiffs, or the indoor obedientiaries without the advice of the Chapter nor in accord with the letter of the Rule, without that of the senior ladies in cases concerning themselves ; in all business and actions, following the instruction of the Rule, by proceeding not by her own feelings or impulse, but on prudent advice given to her.

And when it is not convenient for the abbess to be present at compline, as soon as it is over in convent, the nun who presided over the choir, taking with her two of the more discrete ladies, will inform the abbess that compline has been said; and then all drinking shall cease in her chamber, and all seculars, domestics or guests shall depart, even if they are religious, and the abbess shall at once say compline, so that she may be with the convent in the watches of the night, as long as she is not prevented by infirmity of body.

In her chamber, she should not have more than two secular maid servants. When they are well, nuns will have their meals only in the refectory or in the chamber of the abbess.

It is forbidden for any male to enter the chambers of the nuns except in the case of sickness, when the confessor, doctor or relative may do so in discrete company, but only for their special duties.

Four scrutators are to keep the cloister clear of any who come to gaze or chatter. A nun breaking silence with a man in the cloister is to be deprived of a pittance at the next morning meal. Such conversation is only permitted in the parlour or in the side of the church next the cloister and to avoid unseemly talk, she is to have with her two companions, who hearing what is said, will be edified by useful discussion but will prevent evil communications from corrupting good manners.

Confessions are to be heard before the high altar or in the side of the church next the cloister.

No nun is to go out except in staid company, nor is she to stay away with secular folk for more than three days.

The superstition wont to be observed at the Nativity and Ascension of our Lord, we condemn for ever.

Women are not to be admitted as paying guests without the leave of the diocesan unless they intend to devote their lives to religion. No married woman is to remain.

A habit having arisen on the part of those going out of eating and drinking on their return in the houses of lay people and also of the clergy in the town of Romsey, this is forbidden to the abbess and nuns on pain of suspension as quite unnecessary with the convent so near and as opening the road to sin. Anyone offering food or drink to a nun is forbidden entrance to the church, whether cleric, lay person or woman.

If you wish to keep your vows and maintain your reverence for God, these few words will help you to keep your good fame and your consciences. May the grace of our Saviour grant it be so.

Fare well.