

## LIONEL GREEN reflects on: **THE DESTRUCTION OF A PRIORY**

Imagine for a moment that in the village is a cathedral-like church which was there in the days of parents, grandparents and their forebears. This was a monastery which was the be-all and end-all of almost every family. All had a part to play in a working complex of buildings and farms.

Rumours began to circulate that the monastery was to be closed, and gossip tells of the king wishing to pull down everything. Cardinal Wolsey, with the pope's blessing, closed 21 understaffed monasteries between 1525 and 1529. This precedent "made all the forest of religious foundations in England to shake, justly fearing that the King would finish to fell the oaks, seeing the cardinal began to cut the underwood".<sup>1</sup>

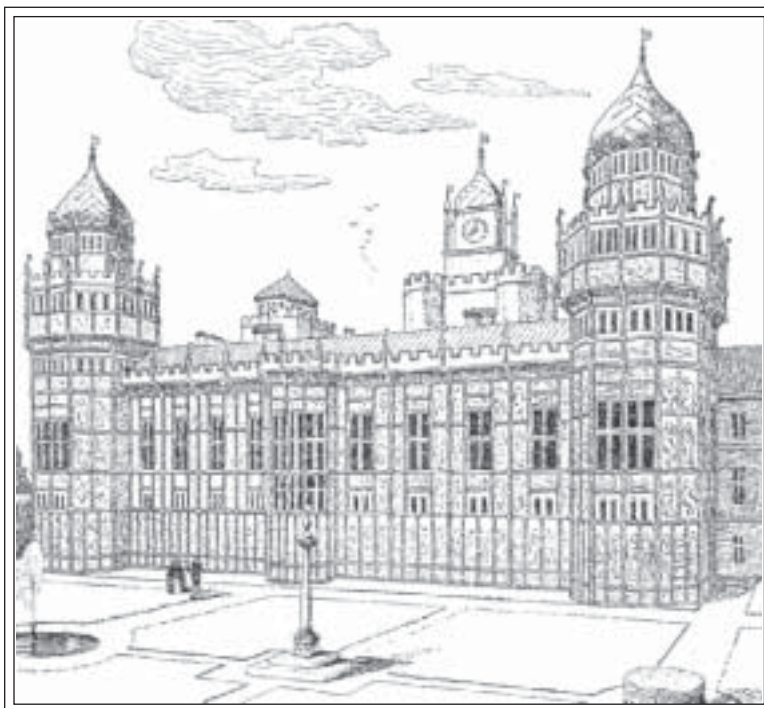
In July 1531 an Augustinian priory at Aldgate in London was suppressed. It was similar in size and importance to Merton, with a tower housing a ring of nine bells. It was to be demolished and "then was the priory church and steeple proffered to whomsoever would take it down and carry it from the ground, but no man would undertake the offer".<sup>2</sup>

The owner of Aldgate, Sir Thomas Audley, decided to realise the value of the stone, timber, lead, iron etc. and employed his own workmen, who "with great labour, beginning at the top, loosed stone from stone, and threw them down, whereby the most part of them were broken, and few remained whole, and those were sold very cheap for all the buildings then made in the city were of brick and timber. At that time any man in the city might have a cart-load of hard stone for paving brought to his door for 6d or 7d with the carriage".<sup>2</sup>

In March 1537 it was the turn of Lewes priory to be demolished. This was entrusted to a Reverend John Portinari who brought 17 workmen from London. The agent of Thomas Cromwell remarked that "these men exercised much better than the men that we find here in the country".<sup>3</sup> The agent continues, "Now we are plucking down a higher vault borne up by four thick pillars 14 ft. from side to side and 45 ft. in circumference ... and that we brought from London ... 3 carpenters, 2 smiths, 2 plumbers and one that keepeth the furnace. Everyone of these attendeth to his own office. Ten of them hewed the walls about, among which there were three carpenters; these made props to underset where others cut away, the others broke and cut the walls". This referred to the eastern part of Lewes priory church which was 150 feet in length with 32 pillars supporting a groined roof, which, above the high altar, rose to the height of 93 feet from the ground.<sup>3</sup> The high cost of this operation may have saved other monasteries from complete destruction.

Gothic buildings were easy to demolish. Each arch depended on the support of a neighbour. A miner could dig under one of the crossing piers, shoring up with timber as worked progressed. A fire lit within the shoring would sink the pier, and all the arches above it would collapse. Adjoining arcades, deprived of their abutment, would fall, bringing down the heavy vaults they had safely carried for centuries.<sup>4</sup>

In the spring of 1538 two men rode into Merton to visit the priory. One was Christopher Dickenson, master bricklayer, and the other William Clement, master carpenter. They were on their way from Hampton Court to the king at Greenwich palace carrying building plans for royal approval. These were for new palaces at Oatlands and Nonsuch, and they called at Merton to assess suitable material to be removed for the king's use at Nonsuch. They went on to the proposed site at Cuddington in order to set out work and confirm requirements.<sup>5</sup>



*An Impression of Nonsuch by J Tavenor-Perry 1911, pictured in Memorials of Old Surrey 1911 p143*

The Surveyor-General of the King's Works was James Needham, but the works group for Surrey was based at Hampton Court under the control of Richard Benese. He was a leading surveyor and a canon of Merton from

before 1530. While at Merton he wrote a book on surveying in 1537, which passed through five editions. He was present in the chapter house on 16 April 1538 and witnessed the surrender of the priory into the king's hands. (A list of the canons with signatures to the deed of surrender appeared in *Bulletin* No.135 [Sept.2000] pp.6-7.)

Merton priory was now suppressed, and demolition began immediately. There would have been countless workmen and craftsmen employed at the priory, but would they have been willing to destroy the work of their own hands? All strata of society had difficult decisions to make. Principles could so easily be forgotten, especially where there was a family to feed and no prospect of other employment.

Dickenson and Clement, the earlier visitors to the priory, were to supervise the salvage work and the conveyance of materials to Nonsuch,<sup>6</sup> and the building accounts of Nonsuch begin with payments for two clerks on 22 April 1538.<sup>7</sup> Fifty carters were employed from Cheam, Clapham, Cuddington, Malden, Merton, Mitcham, Morden, Putney, Sutton, Tooting, Wandsworth and Wimbledon. Each received eightpence for a ton load for the four-mile journey.<sup>8</sup> At first the stone was thrown indiscriminately into carts which travelled as fast as the rough roads would allow. These deliveries, in early May, were mainly of worked stone which went into the foundations of the new palace, being unsuitable for use above ground.<sup>9</sup> It included sculptured heads, fruit and animals.

In May 1538 "John de Whytaker of Merton was paid 13s. 4d. for uncovering the body of the church at Merton Abbey", presumably removing roof tiles, because in July/August the same man was "dry laying" 27,000 tiles on the king's barn at Cuddington at 9d per thousand tiles.<sup>10</sup> When the roof fell, one of the early 14<sup>th</sup>-century keystones (bosses) survived the crash without shattering. It was manhandled onto wagons and used to support the new palace.

By July 1538 2719 tons of stone had been conveyed from Merton. Thereafter the loading decreased, with only 924 tons between July and September, suggesting that the bulk of the demolition was completed by July.<sup>8</sup>

Day after day, day after day, the smoke and dust must have pervaded the district, visible from the surrounding hills. Tears must have been shed as the villagers of Wimbledon, Morden, Mitcham and Tooting witnessed the collapse of the tower, so familiar as part of the view from the heights of Wimbledon and St Mary's church, from the Ridgway, from Cannon Hill, from Morden and St Lawrence's church, from Mitcham and its church of St Peter and St Paul and from Park Hill in Tooting. That which had dominated the view for centuries was no more.

When the tower of Merton fell the bronze bells would have broken into portable pieces for transportation to the foundries, to be cast into cannon for the new coastal castles.

The building accounts show that £184 was spent in 1538 on wages for plumbers.<sup>11</sup> At the priory site, excavations in 1976 between the chapter house and the infirmary revealed a clay bowl-like hole containing lead-drops and a possible hearth. This could have been the place where lead salvaged from roofs and windows had been melted to form 'pigs'. The fires would have been fuelled with old, well-seasoned wood-carvings, easily available.

Further excavations in 1988 south of the infirmary hall revealed large quantities of window lead, glass and fragments of floor tiles from a spread of rubble. This suggests a deliberate sorting of materials during demolition.



*Lead smelting hearth [?] excavated at Merton Priory in 1976 (W J Rudd)*

Bands of workmen travelled from monastery to monastery and occupied themselves for days or even weeks in melting the covering of roofs, gutters, spouts, pipes and windows into pigs and sorting them into fidders<sup>12</sup>. The pigs were stamped with a Tudor rose surmounted by a crown, and when casting had been completed other workmen conveyed the fidders along the Roman road to Cuddington. As a fodder was almost a ton it required teams of horses to drag the wagons laden with lead.

When a similar Augustinian monastery at St Osyth, Essex, was demolished in July 1539, it yielded 255 tons of lead. Over 100 fidders came from the abbey church, another 100 from the claustral buildings and 47 fidders from other buildings.

The lead from Merton was well used at Nonsuch. The corner towers and south front bore decorated plaster panels held in position by wooden beams covered by carved slate hangings and scales of lead. Samuel Pepys visited Nonsuch in 1665 and commented on the walls "covered with Lead and gilded". The octagonal towers had an overhanging storey surmounted by a leaden dome.

By 1541 men were employed at Merton to sort material before it was carted to Nonsuch. Now only the squared facing stone was sent.<sup>13</sup> Some ashlar stone from Merton was used for outer faces of the walls and the masons set the stones so that carvings were hidden. Many pieces of moulding, a lion gargoyle and a female head were discovered at Nonsuch in 1959. The lion was “carved in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century ... [and] after spending more than four centuries resting on the flattened top of its head, it was in a remarkably good state of preservation, even its teeth being intact”.<sup>14</sup> Next to the lion gargoyle the excavators discovered a 4½ cwt carved roof boss which would have been part of the vaulted roof of the priory church. It is painted red and gilded and was found embedded in the foundations of the south-east tower of the inner court of Nonsuch which was probably built in 1543.<sup>15</sup> It would seem that, with the lead covering, Merton priory was present in the south-east tower, from top to bottom.



*Lion gargoyle and female head, both from Nonsuch  
Photo from J Dent The Quest for Nonsuch*



Some stone at the priory would have been used locally and in 1550 stone was supplied to Thomas Mabson,<sup>16</sup> but soon all above-surface stone had been removed. In 1559 the churchwardens of Battersea paid “14/- for three loads of stone from Merton and 6d to John Tyler for **digging up** the stones we bought”.<sup>17</sup> Now only the foundations could provide stone in quantity.

The remains of the priory church thereafter were lost to sight. The land needed time to make it suitable for farming. The sedge withered from the stews and no birds sang.

It would be another 360 years before Colonel Bidder and his gardener revealed the true size and extent of the priory of Merton.

### Epilogue

Whilst looking back to the events of four and a half centuries ago, there must be some regrets. We may spare a thought for the difficulties of the inhabitants of the district, and we may regret the demolition of important buildings, but even if the priory had continued to exist, it would have been rebuilt many times in different styles.

1 T Fuller *Church History of Britain* 1655 p.306  
 2 J Stow *Survey of London* 1603 (ed. Kingsford 1908 I p.142)  
 3 T Wright *Letters Relating to the Suppression of the Monasteries* Camden Soc. 26 (1843) p.181; W St J Hope in *Archaeological Journal* 41 (1884) p.6  
 4 H Braun *English Abbeys* 1971 p.234  
 5 National Archives E 36/245 p.253; S Thurley *Royal Palaces of Tudor England* 1993 p.110  
 6 J Dent *The Quest for Nonsuch* 1981 p.38  
 7 *ibid.* p.261  
 8 National Archives E 101/477/12

9 Dent *op. cit.* pp. 42,80  
 10 *ibid.* pp.272/3  
 11 Dent *op. cit.* p.47  
 12 1 fodder (or fother) = 6 x 364 lbs = 6 x 26 stones = 19.5 cwt (just less than 1 ton)  
 13 Dent *op. cit.* p.80  
 14 *ibid* p.101; *Daily Telegraph* 9 September 1959 p.14. The carvings are on display in the Museum of London.  
 15 *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 58 (1961) p.3  
 16 Surrey History Centre 281/2/18  
 17 Battersea Churchwardens' Accounts f.2a p.236

### News from Merton Priory

There was an open day at the Priory site on 19 November, when David Saxby and his MoLAS team were on hand to explain recent work there, including the unearthing of the impressive remains of a medieval mill. Earlier David had informed us, “The mill we are uncovering is likely to turn out to be the biggest, the best preserved and well-built mill ever found. Today we found that it has a complete headrace built of stone, at least 4m in length (so far) with a very big ?water tank about 15m by 8m (function so far unknown)”.