

LIONEL GREEN has some more episodes to recount from the story of MERTON PRIORY:

Westminster turns to Merton

When Eustace de Fauconberg was made bishop of London in the spring of 1221 he tried to assert his jurisdiction over Westminster Abbey. The claim was rejected by Abbot William de Humez (or Hommet) on the grounds that the royal palace of Westminster included the abbey and was outside normal diocesan control.

The bishop appealed to the veteran archbishop, Stephan Langton (the first signature on the Magna Carta), and the matter went to arbitration. The bishops of Winchester and Salisbury were natural choices, but in addition two further prelates were chosen with the agreement of both parties. These were the prior of Merton and the prior of Dunstable, who was a former canon of Merton. The selection of two Augustinians to support or reject a claim involving the royal foundation of the Benedictine abbey of Westminster suggests great respect for them.

The result of arbitration was total exemption from the jurisdiction of the bishop of London for Westminster abbey and the parish and church of St Margaret. There was a sop for the bishop in that he was to have the manor of Sunbury and its church.¹ The success of the arbitration award soon turned to sorrow for Westminster, for Abbot William died on 20th April 1222, and Prior Thomas of Merton died in ?August 1222.

The chosen arbitrators were Thomas Willst who became prior of Merton in 1218, and Richard de Mores or Morins who left Merton to become prior of Dunstable in 1202. It says something for the high standard of education of Augustinian canons, for de Mores, like Becket, went to Bologna to study canon law. He wrote and taught before entering Merton as a deacon in 1201.² In the following year he was elected prior of Dunstable and priested on 21st September 1202.

The Annals of Dunstable

In 1210, Richard de Mores followed the example of Merton, and began writing annals to record a history of the times. It is from these annals that we learn that the priory buildings at Dunstable were completed in October 1213 and that there were severe storms in April and December 1222. The latter destroyed the presbytery and western towers at Dunstable, and the annals add further that in the same storm “the tower of Merton was blown down, and many buildings throughout England, a large number of persons losing their lives and much harm being done by lightning”.³ The annals often refer to Merton and to the promotions of canons at Merton.

St Edmund Rich

In 1234 Edmund Rich was appointed archbishop, and it was as if Thomas Becket lived again. Edmund was born in the year of the martyrdom of Becket and baptised in St Mary Colechurch, London, the same church as Becket. Like Becket he studied at Paris. Edmund Rich also spent time at Merton in retreat for a year 1213/4, “going in and out as one of the canons themselves”. Here he prepared for his lectures at Oxford. St Edmund Hall marks the site of his residence. Like Becket, the appointment to archbishop changed his life. But whilst Becket was transformed from a life of enjoyment of riches and hunting to a penitent servant of the Lord, Rich changed from a frail humble person into a bold uncompromising leader ready to fight both king and pope, at the same time being revered for his austerity and purity. Rich went into voluntary exile and tried to follow the examples of both Thomas Beckett and Stephan Langton living at Pontigny. Unfortunately Rich died at Soissy and his body was carried to Pontigny for burial. Even before his death, Richard de Mores at Dunstable was writing a Life of Edmund Rich.

After his death in 1240 the canons of Merton petitioned the pope for canonisation. Rich was speedily made a saint, only six years after his death. At that time he rivalled Beckett as the most popular saint in England.

1. John Flete *The History of Westminster Abbey* 1909 pp.101-2

2. A charter of Hubert Walter, archbishop, dated 1200/1 was witnessed by “Master Richard de Mores”, with no indication that he was a regular canon. (*Acta S.Langton* ed. K.Major, Canterbury and York Soc. 1950 p.50)

3. *Annales Monastici* (Rec.Pub.No.36) Rev.H.R.Luard (Ed.) Vol.3 1866. The dates in the annals were one year out. Luard has corrected them, and in this article they are corrected.

... ANOTHER PERSON’S TREASURE

Bill Rudd, who is in charge of the Society’s collection, has a plea to make. When spring-cleaning, or sorting your possessions for a move, or clearing out the house of an elderly friend or relative, don’t rush to throw away all those items everyone accumulates that seem of no immediate value or interest. They may not be rubbish after all!

Photographs, postcards, estate agents’ brochures, newspaper cuttings, event programmes, church magazines, school prospectuses, souvenirs, locally manufactured goods ... There is a huge range of material which has local interest and importance. No matter if it is ‘recent’ - it won’t always be. And if everyone chucks it out it will soon be rare. If you don’t want to keep such objects or haven’t the room to house them, please remember the Society and also Merton Heritage Centre (Sarah Gould 020 8640 9387). Your ‘rubbish’ could be very welcome.