

LIONEL GREEN gave the following address to those assembled in the Chapter House on 2 May 2010 to commemorate the arrival of the canons at the Wandle site in 1117.

GILBERT OF MERTON

Over the years I have recounted many of the events which took place here at Merton priory, and the persons involved in its history. Today I am going to speak of the early life of its founder, Gilbert.

On the 15 July 1099 Jerusalem fell to the Crusaders. Not of great concern to the people of England seeking their daily bread, but important to the Normans because Robert, duke of Normandy, was involved in the crusade. He was returning home and news of the victory portended great celebrations in the year 1100.

On the 2 August 1099 Rufus, the red king, was killed in the New Forest and Henry I claimed the throne of England. In 1100 he issued his coronation charter, which for the people of England foreshadowed many of the promises which were to be included in the Magna Carta of 1215.

On 11 November 1100 the king married Edith, daughter of St Margaret of Scotland, and she became queen Maud, or Matilda, of England. This event in 1100 returned the royal bloodline of king Cerdic (518-34) to the sovereignty of England, which continues to this day.

Henry found that he could no longer trust the earls to impartially administer justice, and to efficiently collect crown dues from the shires. He decided that Norman aristocracy should no longer govern England, and chose 'new men' of lesser nobility, who had been successful in Normandy, some in public office. A new generation of Norman settlers came to prosper under Henry I, and a possible immigrant was Roger, who was made sheriff of Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Surrey about 1104. Sheriff Roger brought his nephew, Gilbert, from Normandy to assist him.

In 1106 Roger died and was replaced by his heir Gilbert, who later was to found our priory. Gilbert was a well-born soldier, and bravely fought as a knight in Normandy. Gilbert's father had died and he brought his mother to England.

Gilbert proved to be a reliable sheriff and served in that capacity for almost twenty years, becoming the most senior sheriff in England. He was one of the few experienced and trustworthy sheriffs in the land, and maintained a high standard of integrity and able to deal with a lack of this in others.

Our biographer describes his attendance at the exchequer where the sheriffs of England assembled twice yearly to account for their shire. They were all agitated and apprehensive whilst Gilbert alone turned up fearless and cheerful.

'As soon as he was summoned by the receivers of money, he sent the cash in, and promptly sat among them, quite at his ease, as if he were one of them himself'.

Gilbert had considerable ability to engage the affections of his social superiors and inferiors alike:

'Counts and barons held him in the highest regard and they recognised his nobility of mind with great gifts. He also had the respect of the lesser attendants of the royal household to the extent that he was treated by them all as if they were his own servants. He was served by them all as well as if he were the king. You might frequently see many bishops and other people of the highest distinction hanging around the door of the royal chamber for long periods, begging to go in, but quite unable to get a hearing. But if Gilbert happened to appear the doors were flung open to admit him, as soon as the ushers knew who it was. He was admitted to the royal presence as often as he wanted.. When the sheriffs of England assembled at the exchequer and were all agitated and apprehensive, Gilbert was the only man who turned up unperturbed and cheerful. As soon as he was summoned by the receivers of money, he sent the cash in and he promptly sat among them, quite at his ease, as if he were one of them himself. As everyone who knew him would confirm, it is impossible to overestimate the respect in which he was held, so much was he loved, esteemed and praised'.

When his mother died, he made no public announcement, fearing the sad news might affect the mood of the court. The queen noticed his sadness and enquired the reason from others. She summoned Gilbert and asked why she had not been notified. He responded that he was afraid that excessive grief might disturb her royal dignity. Matilda took him by the hand and offered to adopt him as her own son and treat him with maternal affection as long as she lived. She caused much more excessive grief within a year, by her own death.

'Gilbert alone was fearless and cheerful'. What an inspiration to keep in mind each day!

Quotations from David Crouch *Birth of Nobility* (2005) 42, translated from M L Colker, 'Latin Texts concerning Gilbert, founder of Merton Priory', *Studia Monastica*, 12 (1970), 260-1.

The Society has commissioned a translation of the whole of this valuable document for future publication.