

**LIONEL GREEN, with more episodes from the story of Merton Priory:
IN THE MIDST OF LIFE WE ARE IN DEATH**

Joyous celebrations

Edward III loved to show off. In 1344 he constructed a circular building at Windsor (Round Tower) to house a large round table around which the knights could meet. Invitations were issued, and a lavish first gathering took place - but without the round table. The king enjoyed dressing up and wearing disguises, and had two suits of red velvet made for the occasion. One was long (traditional), and the other short (a new fashion). In addition he wore a cloak made of 369 ermine skins.¹

In England, Edward III had never been more popular. There were celebrations for the victory at Crécy over the French on 26 August 1346, and at Neville's Cross near Durham over the Scots on 17 October the same year. The king came to Merton and allowed the priory to host royal sports and plays. On 6 January 1347 he ordered 13 masks with heads of dragons and another 13 with heads of men, and having diadems. Also ten short cloaks of black buckram requiring 12 yards of English canvas of flax.² Masks were worn in mystery plays, by men representing devils and demons, and mummers wore the heads of animals. The reference to short cloaks may hint at the king's new style.

In the 1330s Edward had welcomed Flemish weavers to England, and the demand for wool increased. Soon every country in Europe was relying on England to supply both wool and finished cloth. It was probably Edward III who placed a sack of wool in the upper chamber of Parliament which became the official seat of the lord chancellor.

In 1346 Edward's ships sailed from the port of Melcombe (Weymouth) for the successful siege of Calais, which surrendered on 2 August 1347. The army returned triumphantly in October with much loot. It was chronicled that no woman of any standing had not her share of the spoils of Calais, Caen and other places across the Channel, such as clothes, fur, pillows, household utensils, table cloths, necklaces, gold and silver cups, linen and sheets.

Celebrations continued in 1348, and on one occasion when the king was dancing with Joan, Countess of Salisbury, he picked up her dropped garter and placed it on his own knee with a chosen remark. He told his courtiers that he would make it the most honourable garter that was ever worn, and instituted the Order of the Garter, creating 24 knights on 23 April 1348.

The Pestilence and the Monasteries

It was Cardinal Gasquet (1846-1929) who suggested that the crews of the ships returning from Calais to Melcombe in 1358 brought the plague to England.⁴ And it was a canon of the Augustinian monastery of Bridlington, Nicholas Trivet, who records the plague passing southern districts of England in the summer of 1348. On 24 October 1348 the bishop of Winchester, William de Edington, ordered the archdeacon of Surrey to make full use of the sacrament of Penance, in view of the terrible plague which was approaching. Processions were to be made with bare feet in towns through the market-places, and in the villages in the cemeteries round about the churches.

By the autumn it had reached Farnham, where up to 700 succumbed. According to the annals of Bermondsey, the disease reached London on 29 September, and the months of February, March and early April 1349 proved the most severe.

In January Thomas Plomer was instituted vicar of Leatherhead, but died in March. His successor, Reginald Goderynton, was instituted in March 1349, but died the following month.

The shortage of priests meant that untrained clerks were placed into parishes. Richard le Clerc de Chaddesley was instituted to St Mary's Guildford by Merton priory in 1349, but he was not ordained until some time later. This was a temporary appointment and Robert atte Mere took his place in Guildford in 1350.

William de Hastings of Wotton died in 1349, and almost all his tenants. Lawrence de Hastings, who owned Westcott mill, also died.

Near the modern Godstone, the villages of Langham and Marden suffered. The manorial lord, John de St John, succumbed to the plague on 8 April 1349.

The manorial court at Cuddington recorded the deaths of five freeholders and 15 villeins.

The monasteries were clearly affected. Abbot John of Waverley died early in 1349. Also the abbot of Chertsey and abbot John de Waring of Boxgrove, in May 1349. Two priors of Merton died,⁵ and the prior of Reigate. Newark (Surrey) was impoverished. At Michelham in Sussex only five canons survived out of 13. The prior, sub-prior and third prior of Lewes all died.

All the eight chaplains at Sandown hospital near Esher perished at the beginning of 1349,⁶ but the bishop of Winchester held an ordination on 6 June 1349 and appointed William de Coleton as the new head.

In May 1349 abbot Bircheston of Westminster perished, along with 26 monks. About 15 canons died at St Bartholomew's Smithfield, and St Thomas's hospital suffered badly, with the number of brothers reduced to five. St James's hospital Westminster, part of the abbey, lost about 24 brothers and sisters, with only a single inmate surviving.

The pestilence continued, and in 1350 at Shulbred priory, Sussex, near Haslemere, many servants perished.

The primacy itself underwent four changes. John Stratford died on 23 August 1348, and John Offord in May 1349, but before he was consecrated archbishop. Thomas Bradwardine was consecrated on 19 July 1349, but died in London in the following month. Simon Islip succeeded on 20 December 1349, and he lived until 1366.

Monastic life was affected by the loss of experienced seniors, with a relaxation of discipline, for youths requiring sound training, which could not be renewed by the surviving community.

The Round Table

In 1356 the king bought 50 oak trees from woods near Reading belonging to Merton Priory. These were used to construct a round table for Windsor castle.⁷

References:

1. T James *The Palaces of Medieval England* 1990 p120
2. *Archaeologia* xxxi p43; A Heales *The Records of Merton Priory* Henry Frowde, London 1898 p248
3. Close Roll 21 Edw.III pt.2. m28d; Rymer's *Foedera* iii p131.
England, 155 years earlier, had to find 50,000 sacks of wool as ransom for the release of Richard I. A sack held about 364lb (165kg) of wool from some 250 sheep.
4. F N Gasquet *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries* 1889
5. *Victoria County History of Surrey* Vol ii p15
6. Lowth *Wykeham* p84
7. Heales *op.cit.* p254

A Costume Note

The reign of Edward III is one of the most important eras in the history of costume. The drawings on the left illustrate the sharp style change Lionel Green refers to in his first paragraph. The king, with his patriarchal beard and long hair, wears the dalmatica and under-tunic, which with only small changes had served many previous generations. By contrast his second son, clean-shaven and with cropped locks, wears the new close-fitting cote-hardie, which finishes at mid-thigh (lower ranks wore a longer and looser version). William's mantle is also in the new style - very long, with 'dagged' borders, and fastened on the right shoulder with large buttons. Information and illustrations are from an anonymous *History of British Costume* published for the Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, London 1834.

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Effigy of Edward III in Westminster Abbey, and of his second son William of Hatfield in York Minster