

“CALLED IN COMMON PARLANCE AFTER MERTON”

RAY NINNIS reviews *THE CLERK OF BASINGSTOKE, A Life of Walter de Merton*, Michael Franks, sometime Postmaster [Scholar] of Merton College, Oxford, Alden Press, Oxford 2003, paperback £12 (All profits from the book go to the Development Fund of Merton College.)

It is to be expected that a resident of the Borough of Merton, when visiting Rochester, might be aware (in addition to the Dickensian associations) that Walter de Merton is buried in the cathedral. But, having seen much of interest in the city and the cathedral, including Walter de Merton's tomb, it was only by chance that I noticed, among the postcards and numerous souvenirs on the cathedral's sales stall, a copy of this new biography.

In the preface tribute is paid to the main published sources of Walter's life: Hobhouse's *Sketch* (1859), Highfield's *Early Rolls of Merton College* (1964), Martin and Highfield's *A History of Merton College* (1997), and the relevant article in the *Dictionary of National Biography* ("soon to be replaced by a new article by Professor Martin"). Among many whose help is acknowledged is "Miss Barbara Webb of Worcester Park who guided me round Walter's manor of Malden, straddling the Hogsmill River" (some readers may recall a similar guided tour of the same area, but with emphasis on the activities of the artist Millais.

The introduction starts as a verbal visit to 13th-century England (pictorially enhanced by scenes from the Luttrell Psalter). This provides the historical setting for Walter's character and career, and concludes: "Walter's surname 'de Merton' itself reflects his rise in life, being derived from his association from boyhood with the Augustinian Merton Priory ...

[T]here is limited factual evidence about much of Walter's personal life ... but [his] main claim to our attention and interest rests upon his achievements during his life and his educational legacy – which are well recorded".

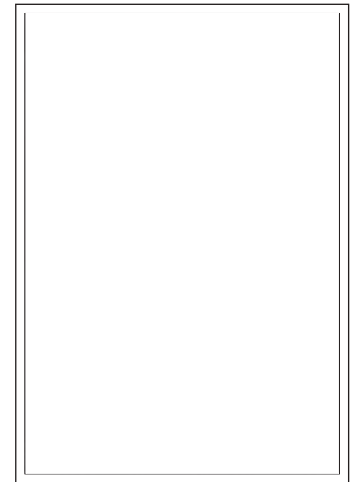
In 12 chapters including those devoted to Origins, Early Life and Education, Merton Priory – the Professional Clerk (c. 1220-38), Royal Service (c. 1235-42 and 1247-74), Serving the Prince Bishop (of Durham, c. 1241-47), the Foundation of Merton College (1262-74), Bishop of Rochester (1274-77) and Walter's Legacy, Mr Franks presents the documented events in his subject's personal and professional life. As well as the significance of Merton priory, Walter's activities in relation to the relatively local manors of Malden, Chessington and Farleigh, and the foundation of his college are dealt with at length. His six years spent in Durham, and the international nature of the medieval church are shown to have probably contributed to the development of Walter's ideas regarding the foundation of a college – and at Oxford.

Here also are found answers, or well-informed related speculation, to such questions as: why did "a well-to-do Hampshire family with land to farm (and probably a property portfolio to manage)" and (eventually) seven daughters to settle in life, launch their only son into a career in the Church?; why was Walter (probably) educated at Merton priory, and what did that education entail?; what was the connection between Merton priory and Mauer's Hall, situated on the east side of the Cornmarket, a few yards north of Carfax, and where Walter probably lodged while a student at Oxford?; are any of the surviving representations of Walter reliable evidence of his actual appearance, and why was he eventually assigned the 'differenced' arms of Clare?; why is it likely that Walter's fall from his horse, and subsequent death, occurred, not in Kent, but in Lincolnshire or Northamptonshire?; and why did *The Sunday Times* in 2000 include Walter among the 200 wealthiest individuals in Britain since 1066?

In spite of "lack of detail" regarding Walter's personal life, a convincing portrayal is provided of "a fascinating, multi-faceted character, at ease in all levels of society, a clerk who (eventually) became a bishop; a much loved and respected counsellor and friend; a generous host; a senior Royal servant (King's Clerk); Chancellor of England (twice, and effectively Regent when Edward I was away on Crusade); successful property speculator and developer; a first class lawyer and conveyancer; an educational visionary, and – at all times a devoted family man". The only hint of dissatisfaction comes from the Rochester Chronicler, Haddenham. Perhaps Walter was not as active on behalf of the diocese as he might have been, but it is suggested that his health may have been failing (he was only bishop in the last three years of his life) and in the spring of 1275 he was at Merton priory "spending much time on writing his will". Visits to Oxford and attending Parliament at Westminster follow, and even a final trip up to Durham barely a month before his death.

Some continental European interests of the English church before the Reformation may surprise, and at least one reader of this biography, if again he passes Ghent on the E40 and glimpses the cupola of St Peter's Abbey there, will be reminded of Walter and one thing he tried to do for Rochester while he was bishop.

The heading of this article is taken from an extract from the Latin Chronicle of Thomas Wykes, Canon of Osney, as translated by Thomas Braun, Dean of Merton College. The extract forms one of three appendices, which together with an extensive index and numerous maps, plans and coloured illustrations, complement the main text.



The 17th-century portrait of Walter that is in the Bodleian Library