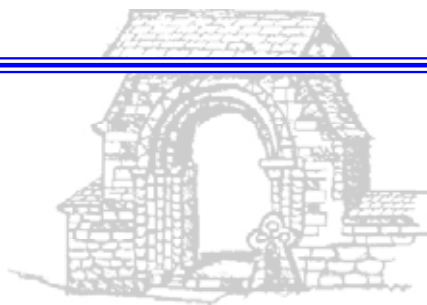




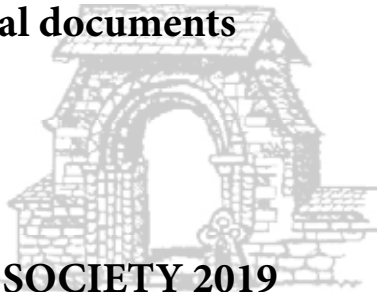
# **A PRIORY FOUNDED**

**Sheriff Gilbert at Merton**



**Translated from original documents**

**MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2019**





*Above and detail on front cover: College of Arms Arundel MS 28 f.18v. See translation on pp.40–41.  
Reproduced by permission of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms*

## INTRODUCTION

### The documents

The four documents translated here form the major part of a manuscript known as College of Arms Arundel MS 28, which has been in the possession of the College of Arms in London since the 17th century, when they were among many manuscripts donated by Henry Howard, Duke of Norfolk. The *Catalogue of the Arundel Manuscripts in the Library of the College of Arms* compiled in 1829 describes this manuscript as ‘A small quarto, containing 24 leaves of parchment; bound with No. XXV’, the description of MS 25 explaining that MSS 29 and 46 are also bound in the same volume.<sup>1</sup> The book measures 230x165mm, and MS 28 begins on f.112 of the book, but also has its own foliation. The manuscript has been known for many years, and an edition of the Latin text was published by Professor Marvin L Colker in 1970, together with a summary of its contents but, although excerpts have appeared in many publications, no translation has ever before been published in its entirety.<sup>2</sup> As the documents deal with the earliest days of Merton Priory and with its founder, Gilbert, sheriff of Surrey, Merton Historical Society is delighted to be able to make the full text available in English for the first time.

The manuscript contains these four documents, together with a fragmentary 1391 rental for Merton Priory’s manor of Molesey in Surrey, which is not included in this publication. Only the third text bears an original title, but the first, which is also the longest, could perhaps be entitled ‘In praise of Sheriff Gilbert’, being an account of Gilbert’s life and character and a record of his founding of the priory at Merton [page 13]; the second text is in the form of an epitaph on the late sheriff [page 33]; the third is headed ‘A letter from the venerable Gervase concerning the death of the sheriff Gilbert’ [page 35]; while the fourth recounts the vision of Walchelin, an elderly canon of Merton, about the deceased Gilbert [page 41].

Scholars agree that the manuscript is a copy made in the 14th or 15th century from an original produced at Merton Priory in the mid 12th century. Text II reads as if it is the inscription on Gilbert’s tomb and, if so, would have been written soon after Gilbert’s death in July 1125. The third text would also have been written at that period, and was referred to by the author of the first text (I.30), who also claims ‘We have said nothing in this narrative that we have not seen ourselves or have clearly heard from those who did’ (I.34). He says that his work had been approved by the second prior of Merton, Robert II, who was in post 1150–67, and who had served as sub-prior for some years before (I.21). The comment in I.12 about ‘as long as peace flourished in England’ probably refers to the period before the intermittent civil war following Henry I’s death in 1135.

The war was between Henry's daughter Maud and his nephew Stephen, before Maud's son Henry II succeeded to the throne in 1154. The fourth text recounts a vision seen fourteen years after Gilbert's death, so around 1139.

The manuscript is sporadically illustrated by simple pen and ink sketches or doodles, some of which are reproduced in this edition. The scribe also regularly decorated the first line of each page by extending the risers of letters into the top margin, as shown on the endpapers of this volume. There are a couple of contemporary marginal annotations indicating insertion of an omitted word, as well as some later notes in Latin identifying individuals mentioned in the text or glossing with Arabic numerals dates that are in Roman numerals in the text. The foot of the first page is signed 'William Howard', and it is probable that these later annotations were his work.

### **Sheriff Gilbert**

Gilbert had succeeded his uncle, Roger of Huntingdon, as sheriff of three counties, Surrey, Huntingdon and Cambridge, by 1106, and remained in office until his death in 1125, one of the few sheriffs of the time to serve for such a long period.<sup>3</sup> He was succeeded in turn by his nephew Fulk, though Fulk was removed from office in 1129. A sheriff was the king's chief administrator within a shire, particularly in financial matters and in the enforcement of justice. However, because there was also an earl of Surrey, and there were justiciars who sat alongside the sheriff in the shire courts, his power within this county was restricted. Nevertheless, Gilbert was still a key figure locally and nationally, well respected by King Henry I, according to the author of our first text – 'The king himself, doubtless fearful of the greatest powers in the land, often used to assail his sheriffs with shouts and insults, but he never wanted to behave towards Gilbert with anything except love and honour, nor did he cast abuse at him in the harsher words he used in conversation with others' (I.24). The passage continues by reporting that Gilbert had privileges not shared by his peers and superiors, because of his handling of the lesser men in the royal household, who would grant him access to the royal presence while others were forced to wait. We are then told that he was equally at ease with those who handled the financial affairs of the nation – 'Moreover, when the sheriffs from the whole of England were assembled at the exchequer and were in alarm and very great trepidation, Gilbert alone used to arrive bright and undaunted, and was called over immediately by the receivers of the money. He used to make a point of going and sitting with them, at once secure and cheerful, as if he was one of their number'. In spite of severe famine in the months immediately preceding his death, we read that 'At the time of his death, not one of his accounts of taxation revenue was unreconciled, and no debts remained to be cleared' (I.24, I.28).

Gilbert had been born in Normandy to ‘a family of noble lineage’ and spent ‘his youthful years in the pursuit of arms’ (I.21). We are never told his age, but we do know that his mother, a widow, died in 1117 or 1118, because she was buried ‘with honour in the place that he himself had founded’ (I.23), presumably the new priory at Merton first occupied in May 1117, and because he reported her death to the queen, Matilda II, who died in May 1118, aged 38 (I.24), the queen responding to the news by offering to act as his mother. William, the only son of Matilda and Henry, died aged 17 in November 1120, drowning when the *Blanche-Nef* [*White Ship*], carrying him and his drunken companions from Normandy to England, struck a rock and sank (I.10). Gilbert was clearly not of William’s generation, having already held a major post for some 15 years, and was probably older than the queen herself, so it is likely that he was born before 1080, when both Normandy and England were ruled by William the Conqueror, and was involved in military pursuits around the end of the 11th century. If he remained in Normandy after the Conqueror’s death in 1087, when the duchy was ruled by Duke Robert, it is possible that he served under the duke in the Holy Land in the First Crusade from 1096 to 1100, though no such mention is made in these documents. However, if he had already come to England, his military experiences might have been under William Rufus, who was in action against Matilda’s father, Malcolm III of Scotland, in the early 1090s, in Wales in 1097, and in France from 1097 to 1099. Henry I succeeded to the throne of England in 1100 and defeated Duke Robert at the Battle of Tinchebrai in 1106, reuniting the two lands, by which time Gilbert was certainly Henry’s man.

It was presumably during these years that his way of life was such as to bring Gilbert such remorse on his deathbed (II, III.6), reducing him to the floods of tears that Gervase reports as ‘he recalled the ugliness of his former life and his crimes, and whenever he thought about his complaints against religious communities’, confessing that “‘until now I have lived scandalously and passed my life criminally. In short, what else has my manner of living been, other than a provocation of the wrath of God above?” So, running through many similar things he bewailed the slippery paths of his former life, so badly lived’ (III.6). Gervase also refers to ‘his past life, when he brought down many thousands of men’ (III.5).<sup>4</sup> Although Gilbert would no doubt have also been aware of failures and sins in his later years, text I in contrast records his piety and his almsgiving to the poor, regularly feeding 13 paupers a day if possible (I.26), while Gervase says he frequently gave alms to thousands of paupers (III.5). Gervase also tells us that Gilbert secretly wore a heavy iron chain around his waist for the final two years of his life, as a penance (III.8). Text IV is a vision of Gilbert’s temporary sufferings after death. Such narratives were not uncommon, beginning with the widely circulated Book IV of the *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory I (died 604). The

church later formalised a doctrine of Purgatory, an intermediate state where venial sins and penances unfinished in this life could be purged by refining fire. Gilbert's suffering of physical pains other than fire is finite, whereas the fires of Hell would be everlasting.<sup>5</sup> Gilbert tells Walchelin that his pains 'seem entirely bearable to me, because I know for certain that my forgiveness will follow them.' Prayer for the dead was a regular part of monastic life, and a founder would be regularly remembered in the community's prayers. Gilbert, having built a church in Merton, decided to set up an Augustinian priory there, and text I details his overwhelming generosity towards the canons of Merton, for which he relied mainly on the income derived from his office, for he was not a member of the landed Norman aristocracy.

According to our text (I.2) Gilbert chose Augustinian canons to begin his house at Merton because, as sheriff of Huntingdon, he had noticed the good deeds of the church of St Mary, Huntingdon, where clerks in holy orders who had renounced ownership of private property lived in community under the rules (the canon) set out in the 'Rule of St Augustine'. By the time Gilbert first founded Merton, Queen Matilda had endowed a priory at Aldgate, in London, and had, on the advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury, staffed it with Augustinian canons. Thereafter, until around 1135, the majority of Augustinian houses were founded by patrons close to the royal court, so Gilbert was an early participant in a trend, and probably reckoned that he could gain support by specifying the order in favour at court. Starting an Augustinian house could cost less than founding a full monastery of the Benedictine order,<sup>6</sup> and though Merton benefited from royal interest (I.3), it could only begin to grow after later endowments (I.7, I.12), so Gilbert's personal financing of the running of the house (I.8, I.26) was especially important in the early days of the foundation. It has been suggested, from the examples of Aldgate and St Bartholomew's, that the Augustinian houses were more inclined than were Benedictine ones to works of charity, but one scholar reviewing the evidence suggested that 'it is especially difficult for us to observe in many cases where the differences lay.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Merton and the priory**

Our first author tells us that Gilbert received his Merton estate by grant of Henry I, 'that Gilbert may possess it freely according to the law of inheritance' (I.1). This probably indicates that he received this estate – and no doubt others elsewhere – by inheritance from his uncle, when he also succeeded Roger as sheriff. Merton had been held by a succession of powerful noblemen from at least the 10th century, including Harold Godwinson as Earl of Wessex, but it had defaulted to the king following Harold's defeat at Hastings in 1066.<sup>8</sup> Gilbert's house in Merton is mentioned in our narrative (I.5) and the likelihood is that it

stood opposite the parish church on the site of the later Church House, which was the only freehold property in the parish in the 16th century. This would have been no modest building; we are told of the ‘honourable, elegant or palatial manner’ of his home life, as befitted one of his status, though it was open to all who wished to come, as he refused to have a gatekeeper (I.25).

Our author also tells us, twice, that there had never been a church in Merton before Gilbert built one there (I.1, I.12), and that ‘those who died there were taken to be buried in surrounding villages’ (I.12). This is surprising, as Domesday Book, compiled just 20–30 years before, records ‘There is a church’ in its Merton entry.<sup>9</sup> The Domesday estate included 18 houses in Southwark, and some land elsewhere, so maybe the church was not within Merton itself, though it is possible that our author assumed that the lack of a cemetery indicated that there was no church either.

Gilbert erected wooden buildings near his new church to house his fledgling priory (I.1). However, the prior whom Gilbert enticed from Huntingdon to rule over his new foundation soon found a more suitable site for the priory, where the old Roman road crosses the River Wandle (I.4). Gilbert was eventually persuaded of the benefits of the new location and showed the same enthusiasm that he had shown for the earlier establishment, arranging for structures to be transferred to the new site (I.5–6) – though he grieved over the demolition of the beautiful church over which he had taken such care (I.11). It was presumably this building that was re-erected by the Wandle (I.4), though an even finer wooden chapel was soon provided (I.13). The new buildings were ready for occupation by May 1117, and on Ascension Day – 3 May – ‘the brothers, now numbering fifteen, entered their new habitation in festal procession’ (I.6). In March 1125, four months before Gilbert’s death, the foundations of a new stone church were laid (I.32), but after his death ‘this work, then nearly complete, was, to great sadness, destroyed, because to certain people it seemed too great an undertaking’. Only ‘part of the front ... on whose base the sheriff himself placed the first stone’ was incorporated into the later church. (Some mid 12th-century worked stone found during excavation might have been reused from Gilbert’s church.<sup>10</sup>) The domestic buildings around the cloister, presumably of timber, continued in use for 15 years (I.7), but further buildings ‘arose after Gilbert’s death’ (I.7), including the infirmary chapel dedicated in 1161, the year before Henry II gave the canons £26 13s 4d ‘for the works of their church.’<sup>11</sup> There is no record of when the present parish church was built to replace the church Gilbert had demolished. The chancel and nave are of the early 13th century, but a small round-headed window survives in Norman stonework at the west end, and the dog-tooth moulding in the arch over the re-sited north doorway is of Norman design, though the reputed date of 1121 is unsupported.<sup>12</sup>

When Gilbert first decided to set up a priory in Merton, he wished to confer the entire estate on the priory but, until the passing of the statute *Quia emptores* in 1290, an estate could not be transferred outright to a new owner, but instead the grantee became a subtenant of the grantor. This was not appropriate for a religious establishment, so it was necessary for Gilbert to obtain a new charter from the king, granting the Merton estate directly to the priory. The process took several years as, although Henry had approved of Gilbert's plan from the beginning (I.1), 'the mind of the king was too grasping when it came to land, and therefore less flexible in making grants of it, especially to monasteries' (I.16). It was not until 1121, when Henry called a meeting of nobles and bishops at Winchester, possibly to discuss raising funds for a Crusade, that Gilbert finally obtained his charter – with great difficulty and expense (I.16–18), though he was able to use his influence to reduce the sum finally paid to the royal treasury, from £136 to around £66 (I.20).<sup>13</sup> A copy of the charter survives at The National Archives, which confirms the statement that 'very great liberties' were granted by the king, thanks to the intervention of the leading courtier and administrator Roger, Bishop of Salisbury (I.18).<sup>14</sup> In the meantime Gilbert had been able to grant the priory two carucates of land – a carucate, sometimes called a hide, being the amount of land which could be ploughed by one plough team – probably around 240 acres [97 hectares] in total, together with a mill, the income from which was valued at £3, as well as the newly-built church (I.2). These were probably the two ploughlands set aside for the use of the lord of the manor as 'demesne land', according to Domesday Book.<sup>15</sup> He regularly supplied the community with 'wheat, wine, meat, fish and cheese' as well as providing for their clothing (I.8), and took personal responsibility for the support of three of the canons (I.26), while also trying to persuade others to donate land and property to the priory to ensure a permanent endowment to support the growing community (I.3, I.7, I.12, I.20). Wealthy donors also retired to the priory, taking canonical orders – something that Gilbert himself had intended to do, but his early death somewhere in the Huntingdon area prevented the fulfilment of this final wish (I.20, I.30, III.6). The priory also attracted senior churchmen (I.29) and renowned scholars such as the Italian schoolmaster Guy (I.9), who was himself the subject of a biographical memoir written by a fellow Merton canon.<sup>16</sup> He was just one of the canons head-hunted to become priors or abbots of the seven monasteries that saw themselves as daughter houses of Merton (I.33).<sup>17</sup>

## The authors

It is likely that all four documents were written by Merton canons, the author of the first text reporting an event told to him by Gilbert himself (I.24), and speaking of Merton as 'our house' (I.14) and of one canon as 'the most famous



among us' (I.9), while the author of text III calls Gilbert 'our lord sheriff' and 'our advocate, the most devoted founder of our church' (III.2). Only one of our authors identifies himself, as 'brother Gervase' (III.1), although we know no more about him. However, the recipient of his letter, Theodoric or Thierry, is probably the former canon of Merton who became abbot of St Lô in Normandy in the 1130s.<sup>18</sup> Gervase was both familiar with Thierry and yet somewhat in awe of him, so it seems likely that he already held a post of responsibility before his appointment to St Lô.

Being members of a religious community, it is not surprising that each of our authors shows familiarity with the Bible, with many allusions to Biblical passages. There are several direct quotations from the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible produced in the 4th century, and many occasions when the Vulgate text has been slightly adapted to suit the context, as when an instruction is converted into a statement. Some passages appear to be paraphrases of the Vulgate text, perhaps being quoted from memory rather than direct reference to the written word, the most obvious being author I's combination of two of St Paul's passages on 'putting off the old and putting on the new' (I.13). (We have used italics to identify words quoted from the Vulgate; the translation is our own.) However, two occurrences of what appears to be an identical paraphrase of the Vulgate text of Isaiah 45:22 turn out to be a quotation from a 10th-century Penitential or manual for confessors, showing the authors' familiarity with such pastoral writings (I.30, III.7). Text I also includes two extracts from the writings of the 7th-century North African bishop, Augustine of Hippo, from whom the Augustinian canons of Merton took their name (I.15). The same author also reveals knowledge of classical writers – Professor Colker has identified two allusions to passages from Virgil's *Aeneid* (I.11, I.20). The author of the Epitaph (II) uses an astronomical reference when recording the day of Gilbert's death, whereas Author I uses both Roman-style dates – 'VII Kal Aug', here translated as 26 July (I.28) – and more familiar date forms – 'in the year 1117 from the incarnation of the Eternal Beginning, on the third of May' (I.6).

Gervase's purpose in writing was not only to inform but to 'rouse the mind of the reader to weeping and tearful sighs' (III.1), while the author of text I explains 'The truth must be told, so that, whatever remains of the good things planted by that place, Gilbert will not be cheated of his reward for what is yet to be spread' (I.34, cf. I.19). Text II ends with a prayer that Gilbert would be rewarded with the blessings of eternal life.

Texts I and III bear many resemblances to accounts of the lives of saints, many of which were written so that the person being commemorated would be formally recognised as being a saint. Thus, the account of her mother's life which Queen

Matilda commissioned from Turgot, prior of Durham and bishop of St Andrews, was instrumental in the canonization of Queen Margaret in 1250.<sup>19</sup> Although no miracles are attributed to Gilbert – the ultimate proof of sanctity – we have already seen that his generosity and piety are highlighted in our documents as they are in the records of the saints. So too is Gilbert's remorse and repentance over his sinfulness, also a feature of saints' lives. But these accounts of Gilbert's life were not intended as hagiography. Rather, it was the duty of each establishment to ensure that future generations would both remember, and pray for, the souls of its founder and other patrons, and it is probable that this was the purpose behind both the recording and the copying of these texts.

## Translation

Everyone who has dealt with the transcribed Merton texts has found them difficult, at least in part (one description was 'recalcitrant'), and some have denounced them simply for being 'Medieval Latin,' neither the Latin learnt at school nor the Latin of the Golden Age, and thus not worth struggling with. The real difficulty is that the writers are men of the Middle Ages trying to write in a style that was not theirs, but one taught to them and held up for imitation, the style of Virgil and Cicero. The whole movement of spoken Latin and the Latin used by the early Church was towards a simplification of syntax and a plainer style with little rhetoric; the Merton writers, especially of texts I and III, uneasily mix this simplified ecclesiastical Latin with the complex word-order and rhetorical devices handed down to them as models. The Latin is in fact trying to be Classical, but it is affected (some would suggest, infected) by day-to-day forms of written Latin. The outcome is a mixture: Classical sentence constructions exist alongside new ones, and compound sentences with a main verb right at the end mingle with simpler ones; either kind can be littered with superfluous words such as 'then,' 'therefore,' 'now,' 'the same' and 'aforesaid'. Cicero it is not, as one contributor remarked.

Writer I likes exclamations – 'Oh, the outstanding generosity of the man!' (I.15) – and questions that he can then answer (I.11). He lines up clauses that end in rhymes created by the Latin verb inflections – '*conferre ... relinquere ... sumere ... insistere*' (I.3) – or creates a list of like-ending nouns – '*scientiae ... prudentiae ... eloquentiae*' (I.34). Sometimes he uses alliteration – '*pias pro eo preces ... permaximus ... plangentibus*' (I.28) – and therefore our translation does not shy away from this device. He has a habit of explaining what he has done, or is about to do: 'So that the attention of those who want to know of this matter is not wearied any longer, we shall take a short cut and pass over many details,' (I.17 – see also the opening of I.21). The translator's desperate search for synonymous verbs in I.33 is caused entirely by the author.

The letter of Gervase has its complexities of syntax, and it accumulates scriptural quotations and allusions, but it does not often exploit the rhetorical devices of rhyme and alliteration.

In the Latin text the Epitaph begins with five hexameter lines that scan correctly, but the body of the piece is in elegiac couplets, sometimes of irregular metre. It seems unlikely that it was ever written on a tomb, for it is twice as long as any from the period collected by William Camden in his *Remaines* (1605), and may be a literary exercise in the use of classical form and metre by a Merton brother. The verse translation offered here, in rhyming couplets throughout, does not claim to be precisely faithful to the original, and it is itself a literary exercise, being written in the style fashionable in the eighteenth century, when many extant English epitaphs were produced (Bristol cathedral has a fine collection).

### **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to the Chapter of The College of Arms for permission to reproduce the image of the pages of the manuscript containing the vision of Walchelin as well as the extracts with doodles, and for their support for this project, and especially to Dr Lynsey Darby the Archivist for all her help. We also record our gratitude to Professor Marvin L Colker, both for publishing the definitive Latin text and for his encouragement of our plans to commission a translation. Dr Simon Neal undertook an initial translation of the bulk of the first document, but was prevented by family commitments from completing the task. Dr Tom O'Donnell then translated the complete text, including that already done by Dr Neal. It was in comparing the two translations that we realised how complex the task was, and we are grateful to them both for struggling to make sense of this most difficult of texts. The translation presented here is based on their translations and has been completed by our present Chair, Keith Penny, who has combined the benefits of his grammar school Latin and his many years as a teacher of English to produce what he modestly describes as a text that 'reads easily enough and is probably fairly accurate'. Keith rose to the challenge of paraphrasing the Epitaph in verse, following a literal translation kindly prepared by Gaynor Taylor, which is printed as an appendix. We have also benefited from the assistance and insights of various members and friends of Merton Historical Society, especially Judith Goodman, David Haunton, Melinda Haunton, Katie Hawks, John Keetch, Tony Scott and the late Lionel Green, to each of whom we record our thanks. But it is to the original authors of our texts that we owe the greatest debt, and trust that they would approve of our attempts 'to show what was hidden, to bring light where there was shadow, to open what was closed and, in short, to make firm all doubt' (I.34).

**Peter Hopkins**

- 1 *Catalogue of the Arundel Manuscripts in the Library of the College of Arms* (1829) pp.39–40
- 2 M L Colker 'Latin texts concerning Gilbert, founder of Merton Priory' in *Studia Monastica* 12 (1970) pp.241–270
- 3 David Burns *The Sheriffs of Surrey* (1992) pp.4–5. The earliest known reference to Gilbert as sheriff of Surrey is in an undated grant issued between 1103 and July 1106: Charles Johnson & H A Cronne *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum 1066–1154 II* (1956) entry 659 p.35
- 4 For similar examples of lay contrition see David Crouch 'The Troubled Deathbeds of Henry I's Servants: Death, Confession, and Secular Conduct in the Twelfth Century' in *Albion* 34.1 (2002) pp.24–36
- 5 C S Watkins 'Sin, Penance and Purgatory in the Anglo-Norman Realm: The Evidence of Visions and Ghost Stories' in *Past & Present* 175 (2002) pp.3–33
- 6 Janet Burton *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000–1300* (1994) pp.46, 51, 55
- 7 Christopher Brooke 'Monk and Canon: Some Patterns in the Religious Life of the Twelfth Century' in *Studies in Church History* 22 (1985) p.109
- 8 Judith Goodman 'Ealdorman Ælfheah' in *Merton Historical Society Bulletin* 197 (2016) pp.15–16; S E Kelly *Anglo-Saxon Charters 15: Charters of Glastonbury Abbey* (2012) pp.439–441, 491–495; Ann Williams & G H Martin *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation* (1992) p.72
- 9 Williams & Martin *op.cit.* p.72
- 10 Pat Miller & David Saxby *The Augustinian priory of St Mary, Merton, Surrey: Excavations 1976–90* (2007) pp.15–33
- 11 Alfred Heales *The Records of Merton Priory* (1898) p.21; *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Ninth Year of King Henry the Second AD 1162–1163* (1886) p.62
- 12 Lionel Green *St Mary the Virgin, Merton Park: A guide and history* (2005); *Victoria County History of Surrey [VCH] II* (1905) p.441 (no evidence is given for this dating); J E Jagger 'Merton Church' in *The Wimbledon & Merton Annual* 4 (1910) pp.59–61
- 13 Daniel Lysons *The Environs of London: I Surrey* (1792) p.340; *VCH Surrey II* (1905) p.94; this reason for calling the Council has not been independently verified; for the value of the gold and silver mark see Christopher Corèdon & Ann Williams *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms & Phrases* (2004) p.186
- 14 TNA C 52/20 (5); Lionel Green 'Roger of Salisbury and the Augustinians' in *Merton Historical Society Bulletin* 142 (2002) pp.6–7
- 15 Williams & Martin *op.cit.* p.72
- 16 M L Colker 'The Life of Guy of Merton by Rainald of Merton' in *Medieval Studies* 31 (1969) pp.257–260
- 17 Lionel Green *Daughter Houses of Merton Priory* (2002)
- 18 Lionel Green *Daughter Houses of Merton Priory* (2002) p.22
- 19 Lionel Green *Building St Cuthbert's Shrine: Durham Cathedral and the Life of Prior Turgot* (2013), pp.84–5, 103–107

## I. In Praise of Sheriff Gilbert

1. Let it be known to present faithful subjects as well as to future ones, that Henry, king of the English, has given a vill<sup>1</sup> of his realm, called Merton, into the possession of Gilbert, sheriff and former soldier, and that Gilbert may possess it freely according to the law of inheritance. Gilbert, that most generous man, built at his own expense a church in that same vill, since there had never been a church there before.<sup>2</sup> He dignified it with adornments, pictures and other fittings, as they were needed. Afterwards he made sure it was magnificently dedicated in honour of the most blessed mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary. It was as if he had been promoted to the rank of sheriff for the purpose of enlarging the glory of Holy Church, and, inspired by divine prompting, he arranged to endow this same place with a religious order. In that same place he put together wooden buildings, by custom sufficient and suitable for a religious community.

When all these things had been done, he went to the king, explained what he wanted and humbly requested permission from the king to bring it all to pass. The king gave his agreement to what Gilbert wished in this matter and very readily assented to his petition. Cheered by this royal goodwill, Gilbert started to devote himself to accomplishing what he desired and to pray to God for a fellow worker to come to him.

2. Gilbert was sheriff of three counties, Surrey, Cambridge, and Huntingdon. In Huntingdon, an order of canons regular had already flourished for several years in the church of Mary, the glorious mother of God. Through the example of their good deeds they had spread widely the sweet smell of their reputation. At length the sheriff, inspired by heaven, asked the prior of that place to join him in his plans and to grant him for this undertaking the service of Robert, then the much respected sub-prior of the church. In return Gilbert promised he would bestow many things on that congregation and grant his sincere protection in all matters. What more can we say? Finally Gilbert gained what he wanted and by the grace of God he led that venerable man away from his priory to Merton. He handed over to Robert the church that he himself had built, as we said earlier, and added land sufficient for two ploughs and also a mill that returned sixty

---

1 a 'vill' was a unit of local administration, comparable to a parish. It is used here instead of 'village', as that often suggests a nucleated settlement.

2 see Introduction p.7

shillings. In addition, the sheriff pledged that, if he should live, the whole vill would be acquired for the servants of God and his most holy mother. Gilbert placed several of the farm workers from that vill under the control of Robert, who was now prior, and made them over to him, to be their lord in all things. Meanwhile many men from different parts of England began to assemble there, to relinquish the world, take on the religious habit, and persist fervently in good works, as far as was in their power.

3. Before there was a church in that place, so some have said, a light was often seen to leap up to heaven at the evening hour when the sun had set, and then descend after an interval of stillness. Any well-informed person will easily be able to interpret satisfactorily what this foretold, even if we were to stay silent about it. In any case, the founder and patron of that place, sheriff Gilbert, for whom is reserved an even more brilliant dwelling, was very busy in every way, to render the place more renowned, bringing sometimes bishops and sometimes nobles of the realm, to commend the place to them and humbly to entreat them to extend their assistance to him. Even Matilda, queen of the realm, came, inspected it and was taken with a warm love of the place.

4. After some time had passed, the lord prior realised that another place, where the monastery now is, was more fitting for quiet devotion and in many ways more suitable. He wondered if by any means he could move there and devote attention to the pious acts which he had already begun. Since, as we have previously described, the sheriff had built his church at great expense and had arranged on behalf of the brothers to raise the status of that same place, the lord prior hesitated for a while to discuss the move with Gilbert. Yet he did begin to intimate through Gilbert's friends the many advantages of the new location and above all the convenience of running water nearby. Eventually the prior himself said these things to Gilbert and he did not delay in laying bare what he had in mind. The sheriff was aware of this desire and he also realised the usefulness of the new location, so he submitted to the judgement of his prior and consented to the move that the prior was asking for. Accordingly he busied himself, displaying the attentive concern which he had devoted to the first house, and which he also desired to devote to this second one, then altogether lacking in orderly arrangement. If you were to look, you would find him with the lord prior pacing the area, now on horse, now on foot; now marking out the space in which to build the church; now measuring the

boundaries of the cemetery; now deciding whether it was possible to lead the water from the old channel to another place; showing where the mill should be moved to and where vineyards could be made.

5. So, with the lord prior present and with the sheriff devoting himself to the work in every way, both through his own men and through neighbours from all sides whom he had often co-opted for this purpose, the external form of the place gradually began to grow pleasing, and day by day, by the hands of the workers, to take on the appearance of beauty. What more? Meanwhile a wooden chapel was built, and the Bishop of Winchester, William Giffard, was prevailed upon to bless the cemetery, after which he was received with a great show of hospitality in the sheriff's house. In connection with the bishop's arrival something happened that was in some ways a premonition of things to come. While the bishop and his companions were journeying to the house, they met a boy who for robbery was to be stripped of his sight. The bishop intervened with his pastoral staff and snatched him away from immediate danger. Without doubt this signified that, in the place he was going to sanctify, many would be led out from the shadows of sin and be guided by the strong discipline of religion to the light of righteousness. So, when the cemetery had finally been consecrated and established, the bishop returned home.

6. Thus, as far as the newness of it all would allow (for the living accommodation and part of the cloister had now been transferred there) these and many other things were fittingly provided. Then, after the lord prior had been in his post for two years and almost five months, in the year 1117 from the incarnation of the Eternal Beginning,<sup>3</sup> on the third of May – and in that year the feast of the Lord's Ascension was observed on that day – the brothers, now numbering fifteen, entered their new habitation in festal procession, singing 'Hail, festival day.'<sup>4</sup> They were surely imitating that day on which the New Man Christ pierced the heavens and showed that the heavenly mansions were open to those who followed Him. The sheriff himself was present at this procession, crowded together with a multitude of people and greatly rejoicing at such a beginning. When the solemnities were over, he caused whatever still remained of the cloister or living accommodation to be transported and to be repaired in its former order.

---

3 the title *sempiterni principii*, an allusion to John 1:1–2, is not unique to this document

4 the ancient hymn *Salve, festa dies* is attributed to Venantius Fortunatus (530–609)

7. In short, in the fifteen years that followed from that time the same cloister and living accommodation were *a shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and shelter from the storm and rain*<sup>5</sup> for the religious community of Merton. Indeed, the buildings that arose after Gilbert's death were constructed, for the redemption of their sins, by different faithful people at different times, as they desired or as they were able. What words can explain how great was the sheriff's concern (as it had been concerning the other place we have mentioned) to bring bishops, together with nobles of the realm, to view this foundation; to show every single thing to them; and to do everything that he could to impart love and reverence of that habitation in the minds of all. Nor was he at all disappointed by the effect of so pious a desire, for, because of the very religious way of life of the brothers living there and also on account of himself, the greatest of them all in love and honour, the place began to be frequented by many brothers and at the same time to be increased in resources and enlarged by several small possessions.

8. But what do we say of small possessions, when this man of such power was in his lifetime the great possession of that church? He kept sending them wheat, wine, meat, fish and cheese, and he bought clothes for the use of the brothers. Moreover, he was able to provide things that were beneficial for the needs of these men, proportionately causing his own impoverishment. It was also his custom, whenever he came from another place, if the time was right, to enter the cloister led by the lord prior, or someone else, if by chance the prior was absent. He would sweetly kiss the brothers one by one, embrace them and sit down and talk with them, if it was not a time for silence. Anyone who wants to know of his affection or care for the place can take note of the details that for some time now we have been setting out.

9. William, bishop of the church of Winchester, noticed that the community was making great progress. He therefore began, with votive offerings and with prayers, to implore the brothers to introduce the institutions of Merton at his church at Taunton. Events followed his wishes, for he had five brothers from Merton, among whom was master Guy, deservedly the most famous among us.<sup>6</sup>

5 Isaiah 4:6

6 see also I.33: Bishop William converted Taunton priory, formerly a community of 'secular' or non-monastic priests, into an Augustinian foundation and appointed Guy of Merton as its prior. It was thus deemed a daughter house of Merton. See also Colker: *Guy of Merton* (1969).



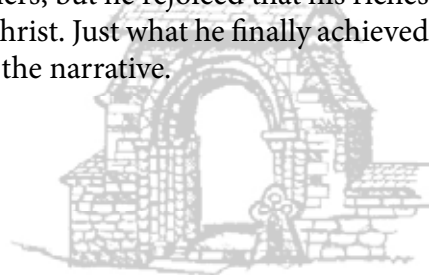
10. Before this, Queen Matilda came to inspect the new inhabitants of the new buildings, as she was not forgetful of her earlier devotion. She brought her son William with her, intending that he might see that place and become more devoted to it, if and when he obtained the highest rank in the kingdom. But very soon they both ended their present life and in their departure they brought most grievous loss to the community. She left the present light in that same year, and, before three years had passed after her death, he died, along with a great number of noblemen, drowned in the waters of the sea.<sup>7</sup> His departure was an example to all of how uncertain are the lofty heights of life.

11. So, the church at the vill was taken down and all its beauty was quickly reduced to nothing. What, I ask, was this most illustrious man suffering in his soul,<sup>8</sup> when he saw that church, so dearly provided, and decorated with such work, so quickly levelled and thoroughly reduced to nothing, almost as if it had never existed? For in that man's heart piety fought against itself: on account of piety he was forcefully ordering what had to be done, but similarly on piety's account he was grieving because it was being done. Who indeed could listen to the pain of this man and not even bend the hardness of his mind and in some measure weep with him? How could anyone who had seen the previous appearance of that place be able to hold back tears at seeing so much change? This patron, who mastered piety and was mastered by it, suffered his dejection patiently, even freely, so that he might then make the same vill less tempting to the king or to certain others. In this way he could more easily fulfil the desire he had had for a long time. Now certainly he had first promised the price of acquiring this same land for the servants of Jesus Christ, and, if you think about it, he had caused the whole of the great expense of this business to disappear, with no ruinous consequences for himself. Every honourable man should think about the great piety with which this man had been endowed, for some people rush to be enriched by others, but he rejoiced that his riches would be carried off more quickly for Christ. Just what he finally achieved will appear in the following sections of the narrative.

---

7 see Introduction p.5

8 cf. Virgil *Aeneid* 4:408



12. We should also briefly point out that the vill never had a church or cemetery provided by its lord until the sheriff himself took possession of it. Those who died there were taken to be buried in surrounding villages. We think we should not keep silent about this, for when the brothers first began to assemble at Merton, lord Robert [II] (who was first sub-prior and afterwards rose to the office of prior of that community) came and decided in that same place that he would leave worldly things behind him. His brother, the lord Hugo, then gave the church at Tew on account of his brother. Once this was done the church was, among other things, a great support to the brothers, then and afterwards, for as long as peace flourished in England.<sup>9</sup> Christ in His kindness did not wish to afflict with an excessive burden of poverty those who were going to serve His glorious mother, and He speedily granted such relief as they needed.

13. But now let us go back and return to the new place once more. The sheriff, who was piously concerned for it in all matters, established another wooden church, much bigger and much more beautiful than the previous one. Here the brothers could gather together in a more seemly way, and in a faithful and godly manner they offered their homage of service at the appointed hours. Over many years in this church nobles and men of lower standing, relinquishing the things of this world, laid aside *the deeds of the old man*<sup>10</sup> and most faithfully *put on the new man, who is created according to God in justice and holiness of truth.*<sup>11</sup> At different times several bishops celebrated those divine mysteries in the presence of the community of brothers, who, standing there, rejoiced in their solemn blessings.

14. We shall be able to explain the observances of the Order, or the selection of the constitution appointed in that monastery in the words of Robert, Bishop of Hereford of blessed memory.<sup>12</sup> Speaking in the general chapter meeting he testified to his hearers that he had ranged through many churches of this Order in regions overseas, and he had painstakingly looked into the regulations of the eminent ones, but not one of them had customs that met with his approval as much as did those of our house. Moreover, it began with a very great gift of hospitality, which has deservedly been retained to the present day, so that from this gift the more wealthy monasteries, whichever you choose, scarcely dare, quite rightly, to

<sup>9</sup> see Introduction pp.3–4

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 3:9

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 4:24

<sup>12</sup> Robert de Bethune 1131–48

compare themselves from afar to that poor little house. They are no more strongly surprised when the matter is repeated in their hearing. We have plainly set out how the beauty of the constitution, and likewise the breadth of the hospitality, highlight the industry of the first prior of that place, known to be the creator of its customs. When such fruits of his labour are revealed, we can see that without doubt his future reward will be great.

15. Now we should say something of that vill, and how (as it is received by that community) the sheriff pursued or brought those changes to completion. However, I should like first of all to give attention to the alacrity of his mind and the great generosity of his spirit in small matters. We draw some attention to those actions, so that his worth may stand out to a higher degree, and so that you may indeed see how many men persist in the acquisition of things; in adding possession to possession; in giving nothing or very little to anyone. What is more disgraceful, they continually nurture these things, with the full striving of their minds, as if they endured for ever. You will also reflect upon those others who abound in ample profits, certainly making grants in some way from these churches, but in fact misusing them in the pursuit of greater pleasures.

But this man, of whom we have spoken, was not like this at all. He gave up all he had in devotion to Christ. Oh, the outstanding generosity of the man! O mind ignorant of the temptations of vice! Oh, how much he would have given if the right hand, the giver, had possessed what he was worthy/wanting to give!<sup>13</sup> It was undoubtedly because of this that he was accustomed to say to the lord prior that if the whole county of Surrey were his, he would never give any of it to his parents, but would rather, with the readiest mind, gather it all for the servants of Christ and His most glorious mother in that one monastery. From this, I ask you what more, precisely, could God justly expect from that man? For, as blessed Augustine said, 'God does not demand from you more than what he gave to you inside; for goodwill cannot be empty.'<sup>14</sup> And elsewhere he says 'Whatever you will, and cannot do, God counts as done.'<sup>15</sup>

---

13 an allusion to Matthew 6:3. The scribe appears to have written *valuisset* – 'was worthy' – but then changed the 'a' into an 'o' to read *voluisset* – 'was wanting' – which makes better sense in this context

14 *Expositions on the Book of Psalms by S Augustine Bishop of Hippo* II (Oxford 1848) p.29: Psalm 37:21 (Vulgate Psalm 36)

15 *Expositions on the Book of Psalms by S Augustine Bishop of Hippo* III (Oxford 1849) p.102: Psalm 58:2 (Vulgate Psalm 57)

Compare, if you wish, this your poor and generous man, poor in things and generous in soul, compare him, I say, to the poor widow in the gospel, whom the Saviour praised with His own mouth while He approved of her two small coins more than the gifts of the rich. *'This poor widow,' He said, 'has put more into the treasury than did all the others. They all gave from what they had in plenty, but, truly, she from her poverty put in all that she had, her whole substance.'* Why therefore is this comparison appropriate? If you look closely at both deeds, then you will consider that it is completely fitting. She put into the treasury everything she had, her whole support; he similarly gave, as a gift to God, everything that he had taken for his own support, because he could not count as his by right what he had been accustomed to receive from others, namely the king's ministers. Look how well the deed turned out for them both. But may the mercy of Him, by whose free grace we are preserved, guarantee that, as the widow's gift deserved to be seen and approved by Him who views all things, so his deed may be recompensed by an eternal reward from that same most holy Judge.

**16.** Now that we have briefly brought these matters to a conclusion, let us return to the story from which we digressed, and bring to the forefront a few things that remain. Gilbert, not forgetting his solemn promise, endeavoured more eagerly to do whatever he thought he could to fulfil it. He knew the mind of the king was too grasping when it came to land, and therefore less flexible in making grants of it, especially to monasteries. He renewed and repeated more than usual his acts of homage to the king, very handsomely done, and at last he promised the king a very large sum of money for the sake of the project. However, the king, realising from the start that Gilbert was not at all willing to desist from the undertaking, on this occasion put off granting his petition; according to certain sources, he wanted, with a certain artfulness, to oblige him to promise greater things.

**17.** What do you think that most honourable of men suffered when the charter he desired for so long was thus put off? What crosses was he bearing in his tormented mind when he could not fulfil what he so greatly desired? For he was afraid that, as human affairs often fall out, some obstruction might intervene, through which he would not be able to bring his desire into effect. Having been put off on this occasion until a future date, he did not wish to stop petitioning, with the result that,

sometimes by himself and sometimes through others, at different times and in different places, he did not stop beating the royal ears until the king offered him what he, with pious patience, was seeking. So that the attention of those who want to know of this matter is not wearied any longer, we shall take a short cut and pass over many details. King Henry caused several of the bishops, earls and nobles to attend a conference at Winchester.<sup>16</sup> The sheriff, hearing about this, immediately ordered the lord prior to come as quickly as possible and go with him to the court to pursue the petition that he had renewed. When he received this news, the lord prior told the brothers (who then numbered twenty-three) what was happening, and commanded them to persist devotedly in prayer for the success of this business. Then he took the sub-prior with him, took to the road and came to the sheriff, as he had been ordered. They then set out for the court. The sheriff said: 'You know that I have been excessively burdened by the royal revenues and am therefore less in a position to pay the money which I am now to promise. For this reason you need to help me, and busy yourselves in discharging this obligation as fully as can be. However, it will be up to me to enter an agreement on that most important matter, and to strive with all my powers for you to gain the lordship of the vill.' The lord prior freely accepted this and replied he would do so with a willing spirit. Anyone who actually wants to know the sum of that money may learn that it was one hundred pounds of silver and six marks of gold.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, we accept that the sheriff discharged the major part of it, as the men who themselves took on and settled the debt on his behalf also affirmed. Certainly Gilbert used to have access to the king's treasurers at will, and because of this he could obtain from them what he wanted in such matters. The sheriff came to the meeting along with the lord prior and found certain powerful men there, whose help in advocating this cause they had earlier engaged. These men were such that the king often used their advice, and he set great store by their opinion on many matters. Therefore the sheriff and the lord prior, along with these men, pressed on in person with their petitions, and the king was questioned on the matter. The amount was made known, as mentioned above, and he was humbly entreated to grant the requests that had been made. What more? With the help of almighty God, in whose hand are the

---

16 see Introduction p.8

17 see Introduction p.8

hearts of kings,<sup>18</sup> and the protection of Mary, the most glorious mother of God, the matter was at length brought to a close, and the aforementioned property was added to the substance of those who are *seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*.<sup>19</sup>

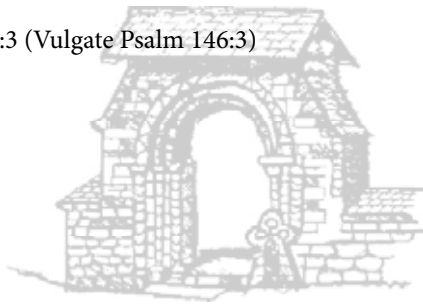
**18.** When the charter was at last complete, some of the lawyers seized on the very great liberties put into it and said they would not dare show it to the king. They claimed that everything had been done in vain, so that the sheriff, as well as the lord prior, began on account of these weighty matters to be affected by anxieties and to be troubled by very great feelings of dread. They feared that, when the charter was read to the king, he might completely annul whatever had earlier been so well achieved. But He *who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds*<sup>20</sup> came quickly to remedy their sadness; nor did He allow those He knew to have suffered

---

18 an allusion to Proverbs 21: 1

19 Matthew 6:33

20 quoting Psalm 147:3 (Vulgate Psalm 146:3)



*The beginning of the 1121 charter of Henry I granting the vill of Merton, Surrey, to Merton priory:  
modern facsimile by Timothy Noad from an enrolled copy in The National Archives:  
TNA C 52/20 (5), formerly Cartæ Antiquæ U No.5*

on account of their holiness to be sad for long. He provided for their relief Roger, Bishop of Salisbury,<sup>21</sup> a man the sheriff had before then often honoured with many great signs of respect. He, discerning the causes of their sadness, took hold of the prior, went to the king, and showed the king what was written in the charter. When the king replied that the charter did not reserve for him any rights or provisions for service to him, the bishop replied, 'The more freely you give all things to God, the better you keep everything for yourself.' In this way he straightaway gained confirmation of all those liberties. May the mercy of our Redeemer restore to him his reward and establish him with the elect in the loveliness of light.

**19.** After this the sheriff returned to Merton with the lord prior as his companion, though he had been made a little ill from the trouble and anxiety he had borne in the negotiations at the court. On the next day he ordered the men of the vill to gather together in the church, and the lord prior, along with the brothers, received these men into his jurisdiction, as they were handed over by the sheriff. After that the sheriff addressed a few words to the men of the vill, saying: 'For a long time I have exercised lordship over you and sometimes I have perhaps driven you more than was just, so I seek your pardon if I have caused you sorrow or unreasonably demanded your obedience in anything.' They replied: 'You have never harmed us; rather you have made yourself known to us in many ways, and so far you have taken care of us very well, as a good lord.' With tears flowing, each individual returned to his own place. This was 1121 years since the incarnation of Our Lord, when the brothers had lived in that new place for four years and seven months. Then the sheriff, Gilbert, undoubtedly relying on divine grace, disinherited himself and made Christ his heir, since Christ would make him a co-heir in everlasting life.<sup>22</sup> O happy exchange! Transitory goods and things about to perish are given, so that good and lasting things may be received. The lowest things of earth are compared to the heights of heaven. Would this man have found such reward if he had given to his family members those things which he contributed to Christ? No, and if indeed he had chosen this way, and desired to seek those things more for his family than for Christ, he would have had the strength easily to fulfil this aim, but he would without doubt have remained for the future a stranger to such a great reward. Thus, preceded by the free goodness of

---

21 see Introduction p.8

22 an allusion to Romans 8:17

the Redeemer, he committed, as he might, the smallest good things to the care of Him who multiplied them a hundred times with the eternal fruit of good works in the present life.<sup>23</sup> For, wherever the fame of the monastery of Merton extends, if at any time anyone asks who stood out as its founder, Gilbert the sheriff is led to the centre of the stage, and that same Gilbert is produced as its originator. May God grant that this same well-deserving Gilbert be recognised for such a deed.

**20.** When this vill had been gained as we described, the lord prior appointed some of the brothers to go to the bishops, and other abbots in the neighbouring provinces of the Church. He made known the poverty of the church that he governed and made the nature of the business clear without being in any way threatening; by imparting something of the needs of the saints, he humbly requested that they might take a share in this matter. Consequently, because it was a matter of grace, not of owing something, each man gave as he wished. Some of the nobles, too, leaving behind worldly things to be with us, contributed among other things items that were greatly advantageous to this same cause. Truly, why are we spinning out delays?<sup>24</sup> The matter has now been drawn out at length, but it will be briefly concluded in your presence, should you so wish. Some of the money was paid little by little, and that great weight was reduced to a sufficiently moderate amount by Gilbert, who supported, lent favour and gave his services. For through him it was arranged that the very great charge of one hundred pounds in silver and six marks in gold was eased in repayment to the sum of almost one hundred marks in silver, and that in various forms.<sup>25</sup> You should not wonder that this could be done, for through favours he had so obligated to himself the collectors of the royal treasury, that there was not one of them who would not obey his orders with a willing spirit, and no one at all who would not concur amicably with his wishes, as far as it was possible.<sup>26</sup>

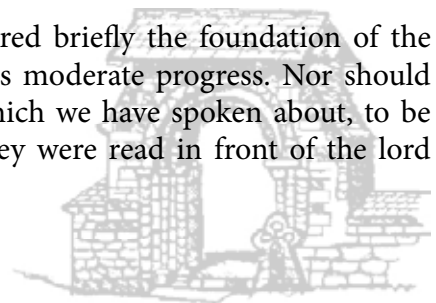
**21.** Up to this point we have considered briefly the foundation of the monastery, and have shown in part its moderate progress. Nor should anyone, indeed, judge these things which we have spoken about, to be fables. Everyone should know that they were read in front of the lord

23 an allusion to Matthew 19:29

24 cf Virgil *Aeneid* 4:51

25 see Introduction p.8

26 see Introduction p.4





prior (he who succeeded the first prior) for his adjudication, and anything that needed correction was seen to be corrected. However, we shall make known some information about the very founder of that place, and so, applying a method to the narrative that has been taken up at length, we shall at the same time bring an end to those things that have been drawn out over a long period. Thus, Gilbert was brought into the world in Normandy, in a family of noble lineage, and spent the first of his youthful years in the pursuit of arms. Then, following the hereditary line of his family, the sheriff deservedly reached a summit of achievement.<sup>27</sup> Once elevated to this distinction, he took pains to show himself to everyone as the sort of man in whom all men would gladly rejoice, and so extend to him the reward of love. Chiefly he immersed himself in honouring anyone whose religious life and moral integrity deserved respect.

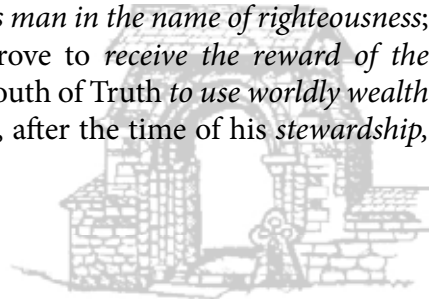
**22.** Though some monasteries conducted themselves with little discipline, Gilbert did not take away the benefits of his munificence. Instead he used to grant generously such good things as he could, to them as to the others. Because of this some of his men would say to him: ‘O my lord, does your worship not know how much everyone is scandalised by their manner of living? It does not seem right that they should thus benefit from your generosity.’ He immediately rebuffed them and immediately restrained their words by his sounder understanding. ‘Let it alone,’ he would say, ‘leave be – do not bring such things to their ears. It cannot be, I am certain, that among so many there is not a single one to be found whose life or conduct is acceptable in the sight of the Lord.’ Oh, how priceless is the clemency of the Saviour! Oh, how unsurpassable the grace of the Redeemer! Who had given it to a layman to say such things? Who had poured out such a gift into the mind of a sinner? Assuredly it is the One who *breathes where He wishes*,<sup>28</sup> and the kindly One who breathes love to His faithful people of goodwill. Undoubtedly inspired by the breath of holiness, this sinner *received a righteous man in the name of righteousness*; by supporting a righteous man he strove to *receive the reward of the righteous*.<sup>29</sup> He had learned from the Mouth of Truth *to use worldly wealth to make friends who could receive him, after the time of his stewardship, into everlasting dwellings*.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> see Introduction pp.4–5

<sup>28</sup> John 3:8

<sup>29</sup> based on Matthew 10:41

<sup>30</sup> a paraphrase of Luke 16:3–9



23. Although he was involved in worldly affairs, he was still granted belief in the Catholic faith; he was a lover of truth and a hater of lies. If he knew that someone was given to lies, he would curse him as an enemy. He did not think it was right to have a friend whom he perceived to be an enemy of truth because of a habit of lying. Who can say how many deeds of honour he performed for his mother, with how much diligence he served her, with what devotion and by what means he provided things that were of service to her? Without doubt Gilbert was inspired to do these things by the One who Himself once thought it right to say '*Honour your father and your mother.*'<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, again recommending the worth of honouring a mother, He spoke through a certain wise man, saying '*Thus, he who honours his mother is as one who lays up treasure.*'<sup>32</sup> Also: '*He who fears the Lord, honours his parents, and he will serve those who brought him into the world as his masters, in work and word, and all patience.*'<sup>33</sup> And again: '*Good shall be repaid to you on account of the good done by your mother, and you shall be built up in righteousness; in the day of affliction you will be remembered; and your sins shall melt away as the ice in fair weather.*'<sup>34</sup> Tobias the father, when instructing Tobias the son, said '*You shall honour your mother all the days of her life.*'<sup>35</sup> The sheriff, keeping all this in mind, greatly honoured his mother and we believe that by doing so he prepared for himself a place of merit in the presence of the God who is good. When Gilbert was present, he would never allow his mother to go to the church with anyone else as her guide, for he himself respectfully guided her and led her back again. He also used to take her up to make her offering, then take her back to the seat in church that he had had most becomingly prepared for her. He set aside a pair of coins for every Sunday and lesser feast throughout the year, in addition to those offerings which he was in the habit of giving each year on festival days. One coin was in honour of the Lord's day itself and the other was for the setting free of the faithful departed. So that we do not linger any longer on these things, it is enough to say in brief that whatever honour and thanks he could show in anything to his own parents, Gilbert aimed in all things to confer all

---

31 Exodus 20:12

32 Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 3:4 (Vulgate 3:5)

33 Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 3:7–8 (Vulgate 3:8–9)

34 Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 3:14–15 (Vulgate 3:16–17) but in place of 'the sin of your mother', our author writes 'the good done by your mother'

35 Tobit 4:3

this on his mother, according to his rule of life. We hear that on account of this he obtained the daily, and indeed continual, blessing of his father.

She herself was a chaste, pious and frugal widow, of a kind God loves, who gave alms and pity to the poor. Several times she removed her own clothing and in pity gave it to those in need. Not only would she not do shameful or indecent things, she shuddered to hear such things said in front of her. Gilbert was distinguished by such a mother: he marked most attentively her pious devotions and at the last he buried her with honour in the place that he himself had founded.

**24.** We have indeed thought it right to make a brief record and to demonstrate how this man may be considered among the more powerful men of his age. The king himself, doubtless fearful of the greatest powers in the land, often used to assail his sheriffs with shouts and insults, but he never wanted to behave towards Gilbert with anything except love and honour, nor did he cast abuse at him in the harsher words he used in conversation with others. Gilbert himself used to report this. Queen Matilda, whom we mentioned earlier, also showed how much she loved Gilbert, since out of regard she adopted him in place of a son. Indeed, when Gilbert came before the queen after the death of his mother, she respectfully welcomed him in her customary manner and immediately began to speak to him. 'My friend,' she said, 'surely your lady mother is not dead?' He replied 'My lady, your servant is dead.' Then she said 'And why, my very dear friend, did you not tell me this?' He said 'I was afraid, my lady, that your honour might be excessively saddened by such a message.' She said 'Come, dearest one, come to me, and put your hands into my hands.' After he had done what she ordered, she said: 'From this time forward I take you to myself in the place of a son, and I tell you that, as long as I live, you will have me as a mother, with motherly affection for you.' Gilbert offered his thanks and went away, joyful at such a gift. We have told this story just as we heard it from the sheriff's mouth.

Earls and nobles submitted to him in the highest degree and through very great favours praised the nobility of his mind. Indeed, he held in his hand the patronage of the royal household in such a way that he used all those men as his own, and he was served by all of them individually as if he were their lord. You would often see several bishops and lords, men endowed with the highest honours, standing for a long time at the door of the royal

chamber and seeking access, but they were unable to accomplish this at all, though they were powerful figures. But if Gilbert happened to appear, the doors were immediately opened once the ushers had heard who he was, and, however many men he had at his command, they were admitted with him. Moreover, when the sheriffs from the whole of England were assembled at the exchequer and were in alarm and very great trepidation, Gilbert alone used to arrive bright and undaunted, and was called over immediately by the receivers of the money. He used to make a point of going and sitting with them, at once secure and cheerful, as if he was one of their number. Because he affirmed the worth of everyone he met, it is hard to express how highly he was rated by the world at large, how much he was loved, cherished and praised by everyone.

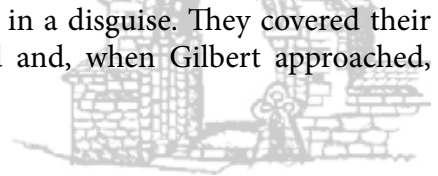
**25.** Although he had almost nothing, from the riches of his ample heart he could not accept that any one of his peers should have more precious clothes, more lavish food or a more beautiful horse than he himself used, or that such a man, however much he naturally had a regard for the glory of the age, should live in his own home in a more honourable, elegant or palatial manner. He did not in any way want to have a gatekeeper or porter in his house, since anyone who arrived was worthy of such hospitality as matched his person and standing. The Saviour's true saying, '*Give and it will be given to you,*<sup>36</sup> was plainly confirmed in this man, for he freely gave to everyone and God gave him abundantly everything he needed. He did not think about tomorrow, always having faith in the Lord.<sup>37</sup> He held fast to the words of his father, a most generous man of great possessions, who was in the habit of saying during family conversations, when rebuking his household for meanness, 'The day comes and food comes with it.' To put it more plainly, He who with His accustomed goodness gives the day, will with the same goodness grant the food that is needful for the day.

**26.** Gilbert was so devoted to almsgiving that he always carried money with him for this purpose. He gave kindly and with a generous hand to the poor who came to him in search of aid. Certain boys, who followed his retinue on foot, were aware of this habit and, when they knew where he was going, they ran ahead, dressed in a disguise. They covered their heads to stop them being recognised and, when Gilbert approached,

---

36 Luke 6:38

37 an allusion to Matthew 6:34



asked for alms like paupers. Once they had got their money, they changed their clothes a second time and again went out to meet the sheriff, as he drew near, and at once they received what they asked for. It is said that in this way one of them made off with four or five coins from him in just one day. Gilbert had thirteen poor men sit down at table with him each day, if any such were present in a place where this could suitably be done. Besides these things, during the long time he possessed the vill by right of lordship he caused three canons to be maintained by a daily allowance.

**27.** In the year 1125 from the incarnation of Our Lord, when Gilbert was almost fifteen days from leaving this present life, there was a great famine. The reeves<sup>38</sup> he had appointed in the various royal villis, came to him with serious complaints about the poor. They said that they trampled, ate and laid waste the corn in the fields. 'What has been done about them?' he asked. They said: 'My lord, we have often beaten them, injured them, and then chased them off. But even after doing all that we just could not keep them out. As soon as we had finished they turned back and like beasts demolished what remained.' Gilbert said to them: 'You have acted badly, and what you have done greatly pains me. Do not treat them like that again and let them eat as much as they want.' They responded: 'The cornfields belong to our royal lord, as you know, so your wisdom should act cautiously and not let anything arise that could cost money.' 'You are not to have any worries about this business,' he said. 'If any reckoning is demanded, it will be answered by me, not by you.' So the reeves gave their word and promised not to harm the poor again, but rather to obey his orders in this matter and fulfil his will in all things concerning the poor.

**28.** Applying himself to such works, the most noble of men left to be with God. Men in religious orders and the poor followed his departure with due ceremony and with mourning and tears, pouring out pious prayers on his behalf and justly lamenting the loss of him who had been their greatest comfort. At the time of his death, not one of his accounts of taxation revenue was unreconciled, and no debts remained to be cleared. It was given to God's mercy alone to bear the care of his soul in the short moment of his death. He passed away on the 26 July, around the middle of Sunday night, 8¼years after the brothers had come to the new location so often referred to in this text.

---

38 the reeve was the estate manager, usually a customary tenant or 'villein'

29. The number of brothers there had then reached thirty-six, when such a great [loss overtook the source]<sup>39</sup> of their solace. Among their number were many considered great in name and deeds, for example, lord Stephen, once Archdeacon of Winchester or Surrey,<sup>40</sup> and lord Serlo, once Dean of Salisbury. Besides them there were many others who were distinguished no less in religion than in learning, mighty, indeed, in worldly nobility but also – of greater merit – predominant by honesty of character and greatness of mind. See how this house was upheld by strong supports, even while at the same time it was forsaken by the protection of its founder.

30. He who desires to know more about the death of our founder and his deeds should certainly refer to the letter of Master Gervase, a man of uncommon virtue, and there he can find out what kind of death the sheriff had.<sup>41</sup> However, we think we should add a certain episode worthy of inclusion in our tale, which we notice is missed out in the letter. When the sheriff knew he was seriously unwell, he immediately ordered that letters be written in which he asked the lord prior to come to him with all speed. But his men deceived him and detained the letter-bearer without Gilbert's knowledge. The men were afraid to send the letter because they did not want the lord prior to come to Gilbert; they thought that, if the prior came, the sheriff would immediately abandon secular life. This would have happened, if the prior had been with Gilbert while he was still alive. What did you want to do, you wretched ones? Why did you try to hinder his salvation, you who benefited from the great number of good deeds he often showed to you? Why did you not allow him to renounce the world, at least in the trial of life's extremity? Your plot was not of advantage, nor could it be of any use, because Christ's grace will save him from the emptiness of worldly desires, as the prophet said: 'When you have turned and repented, you will be saved.'<sup>42</sup> He yielded to this with a true confession and the groanings of penitence, and for that reason, by Christ's generous gift of true salvation and eternal peace, he is about to enter the gate of heaven.

---

39 partial conjecture: one or more words seem to have been omitted by the scribe

40 there were two archdeaconries in Winchester diocese – Winchester and Surrey

41 see section III

42 a quotation from Pseudo-Theodore's Penitential XLIII (B Thorpe *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England* (1840) II p.50) based on Isaiah 45:22

**31.** The venerable men, both canons and monks, who received his confession have said that they saw no one with such great contrition, and they had never perceived in anyone such a pure grace of confession. Thanks be to You, O Christ, thanks be to You, re-creator of the world, redeemer of death, restorer of life. O good Jesus, what pardon did You establish from the beginning to give to the wicked who repented? O raiser of the fallen and consoler of the sad, what pardon were You good enough to heap on those who turned to You? You do not think to shut the bowels of Your compassion to those who are not ashamed to uncover the offences of their wickedness and who trust in the glory of Your name. You grant to active penitents, not more penance, but pardon and grace, and You will shortly confer on them the glory of the heavenly mansions. You do not remember what they had earlier been, those happy ones who, by resisting their selves, thereafter conquered themselves for Your sake.

**32.** In March in the year of his death, Gilbert began the church in that place, a most splendid, beautiful and mighty work. After Gilbert's death this work, then nearly complete, was, to great sadness, destroyed, because to certain people it seemed too great an undertaking. A part of the front remains, on whose base the sheriff himself placed the first stone, with holy water, cross and lights, and the community standing by. After him, the lord prior placed the second, then each brother placed a single stone and so, in order, they all came.

**33.** It now seems fitting to add the number of monasteries that were later begun, extended and fashioned into religious institutions, all led from this one place through Gilbert and divine grace. Now, so that we may consider the order of their development, let us place first the church at Taunton, founded by William, Bishop of Winchester. Then let us reckon that the second was the church at Bodmin, created by William, Bishop of Exeter, no less of a patron of the religious life. Let us place third the church at Edinburgh built by David, King of Scotland. Next let us bring into fourth place the notable church built at Cirencester by Henry, King of England. Following this let us offer the fifth, the church of St Gregory, sited at Canterbury and endowed for a religious order by Archbishop William. Let us add the sixth, the church of St Lô, prepared by Algar, Bishop of Coutances, a canon of the Order over the sea.<sup>43</sup> We end with

---

43 in Normandy

the church of the Holy Trinity at Twinham, assigned to a regular Order by Count Aldwin,<sup>44</sup> the seventh place under the seal of the sevenfold Holy Spirit. The aforementioned monastery, like a vine well cultivated and fertile, brought forth these fruits, God himself being their author, over thirty-three years, stretching out, as the Psalmist says, *its branches to the sea, and its boughs to the river.*<sup>45</sup>

**34.** Thus, each of these things we have brought into the light can be judged at will. It was our plan to show what was hidden, to bring light where there was shadow, to open what was closed and, in short, to make firm all doubt. We have said nothing in this narrative that we have not seen ourselves or have clearly heard from those who did. The truth must be told, so that, whatever remains of the good things planted by that place, Gilbert will not be cheated of his reward for what is yet to be spread. Although he was a sinner and unworthy, he will stand out, because he founded a monastery that was the origin of all these others. He received by divine grace a helper in his good deeds, the lord Robert of holy memory, first prior of that church, a man exalted in everything, in knowledge, pre-eminent in prudence, elegant in eloquence, foremost in judgement, exceeding in generosity and liberality, outstanding in pity and compassion. Robert, after spending forty-three years in the habit of a canon and governing the church for thirty-five years, came to a happy final rest, leaving human affairs on the fourth of January. Look, holy convent of Merton, from what kind of a founder and first prior you grew! Now you rejoice at the fame of their deeds, now you are honoured by the presence of both of their graves, now you are consoled by faith in their hope of salvation. Though now you are deprived of them, you have had a founder of the greatest generosity and a leader of the most erudite character, and so in the future you will so devote yourself that, when you repay the debt of the world of the flesh, you will deserve to be enrolled along with those enthroned in heaven. Try, then, to be happy and freed [from sin and without earthly burden].<sup>46</sup> May Jesus Christ, our Lord, with the attendant merits of His most holy mother, grant all this to them and to you, for He is the praise and exultation of the blessed, the hope and consolation of the wretched, whose power and dominion is through all the ages. Amen.

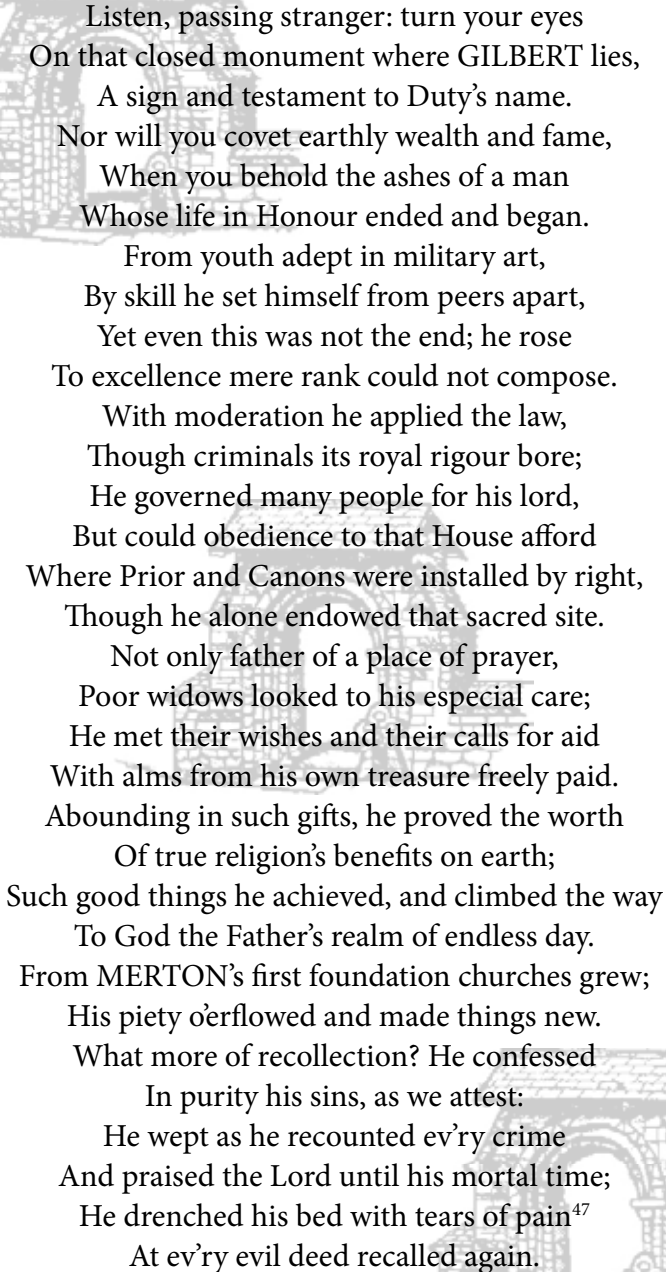
44 this is presumably an error for Baldwin de Redvers, 1st Earl of Devon, who held the manor of Twinham, now Christchurch, Dorset

45 Psalm 80:11 (Psalm 79:12 in the Vulgate)

46 partial conjecture: one or more words seem to have been omitted by the scribe



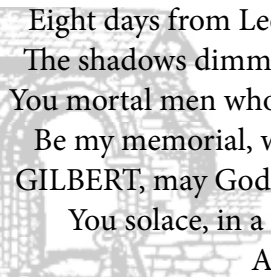
## II. The Epitaph



Listen, passing stranger: turn your eyes  
On that closed monument where GILBERT lies,  
A sign and testament to Duty's name.  
Nor will you covet earthly wealth and fame,  
When you behold the ashes of a man  
Whose life in Honour ended and began.  
From youth adept in military art,  
By skill he set himself from peers apart,  
Yet even this was not the end; he rose  
To excellence mere rank could not compose.  
With moderation he applied the law,  
Though criminals its royal rigour bore;  
He governed many people for his lord,  
But could obedience to that House afford  
Where Prior and Canons were installed by right,  
Though he alone endowed that sacred site.  
Not only father of a place of prayer,  
Poor widows looked to his especial care;  
He met their wishes and their calls for aid  
With alms from his own treasure freely paid.  
Abounding in such gifts, he proved the worth  
Of true religion's benefits on earth;  
Such good things he achieved, and climbed the way  
To God the Father's realm of endless day.  
From MERTON's first foundation churches grew;  
His piety o'erflowed and made things new.  
What more of recollection? He confessed  
In purity his sins, as we attest:  
He wept as he recounted ev'ry crime  
And praised the Lord until his mortal time;  
He drenched his bed with tears of pain<sup>47</sup>  
At ev'ry evil deed recalled again.

---

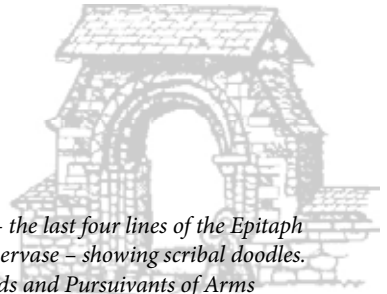
47 a paraphrase of Psalm 6:6 (Vulgate Psalm 6:7)



Eight days from Leo's rise to solar height<sup>48</sup>  
The shadows dimmed the hero's final light.  
You mortal men who passing read my deeds,  
Be my memorial, where God's love leads.  
GILBERT, may God rejoice in you and send  
You solace, in a life that has no end.  
Amen.

---

<sup>48</sup> it is likely that this astronomical description is intended to indicate the date given for Gilbert's death in sections I and III – 26 July 1125 – but dates for the sun's transit through Leo would have differed from current dates because of calendar changes



*Detail from College of Arms Arundel MS 28 f.14v – the last four lines of the Epitaph and the heading and first two lines of the letter of Gervase – showing scribal doodles.  
Reproduced by permission of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms*

### III. A letter from the venerable Gervase concerning the death of the sheriff Gilbert

1. Brother Gervase to his most reverend brother Theodoric:<sup>49</sup> best wishes for all those good things you desire. At first I hesitated, dearest brother, not sure whether I should write to one of your eminence, when I decided that I should remember your friendship. For a long time you have been able to learn about the sheriff through fickle rumour; now, to judge from the carefully compiled information sent by you, it follows that with great eagerness of mind you will immediately welcome the little nuggets I am sending you. Because the truth comes better from me than from rumour, which has no fear of lying, I do not want to confuse you about these same matters, especially when a common profession holds us, knitted together as we are for good or evil chance by the same holy love. Therefore I have sent you this letter of information, brief, but crammed with mourning and lamentation, and of no small bitterness; it will rouse the mind of the reader to weeping and tearful sighs.

2. Alas, the common and miserable condition of man! Oh, the days of his life are fallen and full of many mournful miseries, without number! Oh, the necessary and universal lament of the sons of Adam! Alas, what a young and weighty sorrow the old fault pressed upon us! He, the dearest father of us all, our advocate, the most devoted founder of our church, he who was touched with the highest joy by the smallest sight of our brothers or brief enjoyment of their conversation: our lord sheriff, Gilbert, falling to nature, was taken from our midst on 26 July. He died far away, and the body was brought to us.

3. According to custom they carried his body back, and on the way their mouths were filled with tears; choking seized their voices and, although they were moved inside, they could not open their sticking tongues. Bitter moans overcame the chanting of psalms. The songs were broken, trapped by laments, weighed down with moans, shackled by sobbing; their veins were deprived of power. Each and every one seemed of the opinion *Who will give water to my head and a fountain of tears to my eyes?*<sup>50</sup> It was not unworthy that they united in moans, unleashed their mouths in crying, and followed the common signs of pain to the grave, although it

---

49 see Introduction p.9

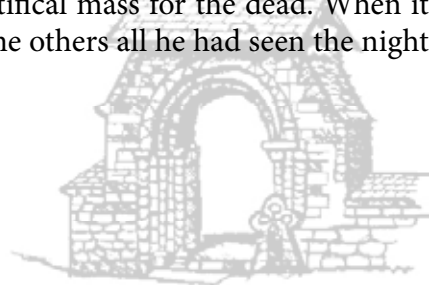
50 Jeremiah 9:1

seemed that the strength of Christian faith was brought to naught. But at last hope of the resurrection and trust in the hoped-for mercy of the All-Powerful soothed them. The Lord *has done whatsoever pleased him*,<sup>51</sup> whose will alone is sufficient for comfort; we are commanded to set no other before Him. What more can be said? Rites worthy of such a funeral were prepared.

4. For by the holy and divine plan of providence it happened that John, Bishop of Rochester, a respected friend of ours, was staying nearby at one of his villas, as if awaiting the day, with his archdeacon, lord Hervey, and his assistant clergy. So the lord prior sent lord Serlo and the Dean of Waltham to ask John to assume responsibility for the funeral. He happily received them and agreed to their pious request. This was done then so that the bishop might return to his bed after the singing of the night office. He had a vision that he had come to a beautiful church. Standing outside it he marvelled at its structure and the quality of the work, and someone approached that he did not know. 'Enter, Father,' he said. 'Come inside and pray.' The bishop, entering the church, carefully studied the beautiful construction. He stared at everything with a careful eye and saw a screen of iron that looked to be woven from iron vines, which the common people call a trellis. The trellis separated the presbytery and altar from the other parts of the church, and he saw on the pavement in front of the altar a man's body modestly arranged and covered. Great crowds of poor people had gathered and eagerly praised the great works of God in many sweet and harmonious songs. When this vision appeared to his eyes and ears, the unknown person said: 'Father, do you know whose corpse it is that you see?' and added 'It is Gilbert, the sheriff.' So the bishop, whose attention was firmly held by the sweet melodies of music much sweeter than that of man, stirred and awoke. In the morning he did not forget his promise and came to us early with his assistant clergy and celebrated most gloriously and sufficiently the full pontifical mass for the dead. When it was over he told the lord prior and some others all he had seen the night before.

---

51 Psalm 115:3 (Vulgate 113:11)



5. It is commonly agreed that, while he was alive, Gilbert was compassionate to the poor. Who, either here or in other religious orders, has not experienced his bountiful gifts? However, so that I may keep silent about the other times, in his past life, when he brought down many thousands of men, I am going to follow on, with great charity, with what might be set down first: that he distributed goods in great abundance and he gave to the poor, as if saying to himself ‘*What shall I do, now that my lord is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do.*’<sup>52</sup> Let me use the advice of the great and wisest counsellor. I shall *make myself friends by means of dishonest wealth, so that when I fail, they may receive me into everlasting dwellings.*<sup>53</sup> So he frequently made over alms that he had laid aside into the laps of five thousand poor people, and seven thousand, or even, I say, several times to nine thousand paupers at once. While he himself was at hand their prayers for him were boundless.<sup>54</sup> For *by mercy and truth iniquity is redeemed*<sup>55</sup> and *he that is inclined to mercy, shall be blessed: for of his bread he hath given to the poor.*<sup>56</sup>

6. The following day, when his mortal clay had been committed to the earth, the lord prior, the examiner of Gilbert’s goings out and comings in,<sup>57</sup> was worried about the time when his health would fail, and he wanted to inspire both himself and us in anticipation of the clemency of almighty God’s mercy. He was keen to hear from one of the servants who, more than the others, had served Gilbert while he was sick. The prior often called on the servant to ask him questions. The prior said ‘Start with what you recall of your lord, what stands out. Remember equally this, his end, and what he said, so that by his advice he may be a channel of spiritual healing.’ The servant replied: ‘He was touched by serious discomfort, but not yet by that great adversity; we partly suspected the danger that was quickly to become too much for him. It happened, I know not how, that he was left alone by our men in the bed in which he lay. Once all possible witnesses had gone, he recalled the ugliness of his former life and his crimes, and whenever he thought about his complaints against religious communities

---

52 Luke 16:3–4

53 adapted from Luke 16:9. The scribe appears to have written *materna* instead of *in aeterna*

54 the contraction *ad imū* is used, conjectured to be an abbreviation for *ad immensum*

55 Proverbs 16:6

56 Proverbs 22:9

57 an allusion to Job 36:23

he began to be burdened, pricked most sharply in his breast by the stings of a bitter pain. At last he burst into tears and wet the bed-covers with great outpourings for his salvation. When I learnt he had been left alone, I went in quickly and found everything full of tears, and he was groaning and crying. The bed was bedewed, the pillows dripping, the linens soaked. “What,” I said, “my lord, what are these many, great, deep sighs? What are these storms of tears?” Then he said: “I must sigh and mourn with such floods of tears. For until now I have lived scandalously and passed my life criminally. In short, what else has my manner of living been, other than a provocation of the wrath of God above?”’ So, running through many similar things he bewailed the slippery paths of his former life, so badly lived.

O kindly pity and pitying kindness of the Saviour who *does not reject a heart that is contrite and humble*,<sup>58</sup> deserving and favourable; He neither creates death nor rejoices at the ruin of the wicked. Men come to Him through deeds and words. He does not cease to go ahead of some and follow after others, to bestow on them the greatest offering that can be embraced by all the striving of the soul, the gift of grace through tears. He himself does this, and not on account of their merits, which are worthless. The man is surely happy whose eyes, like the prophet’s, *sent forth springs of water*.<sup>59</sup> *They who sow in tears, reap in joy*.<sup>60</sup> Humble pleading is not the least of these tears, nor is it ineffectual. For the prince of the apostles unexpectedly washed away his threefold denial of the Master by the efficacy of his tears,<sup>61</sup> and through tears the many sins of she who sinned were forgiven, and she is now most blessed.<sup>62</sup>

After a few days passed, Gilbert summoned monks and clerks in holy orders, by whose censure and questioning he could bring to mind his sins, whatever they were. Weeping most abundantly, and more than once, he made his confession. He despised himself so much that he would not allow a certain layman, who was present, to be excluded from the hearing. We heard this from those venerable and pious men who came with the body, the prior of St Mary’s of Huntingdon and the prior of St Neots.<sup>63</sup>

58 Psalm 51:17

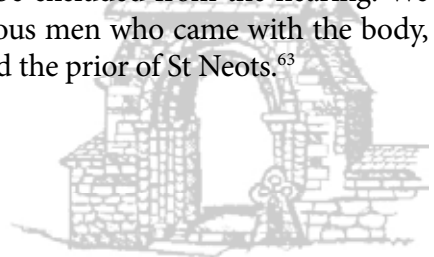
59 Psalm 119:136 (Vulgate Ps 118:136)

60 Psalm 126:5 (Vulgate Psalm 125:5)

61 Mark 14:72

62 see Luke 7:36–50

63 hints of his place of death



7. It is never too late for conversion. As Isaiah says: ‘When you turn to me with sighs of repentance, then you are whole;’<sup>64</sup> and again: ‘Return to me, and I shall deliver you.’<sup>65</sup> *I am the Lord and there is none beside me.*<sup>66</sup> Ezekiel, too, says truly: ‘Repent, and return from your wickednesses, O house of Israel, and your misdeeds will not be a torment to you.’<sup>67</sup> Jeremiah is little different: ‘And you have forsaken me.’<sup>68</sup> *turn, and I will help you, says the Lord.*<sup>69</sup> Such is the settled opinion from many men, together with the great insight contributed by the infant church. The Lord and master of the prophets condescended to sanctify the thief who from great and capital crimes was translated after an interval of time to the joys of paradise.<sup>70</sup> Tormented by wrongs demanding and deserving shame, at the ninth and last hour, when he was on the point of entering the gates of death, he confessed ‘He is our Saviour.’ That evening he became one of the blessed, a companion of the holy and a co-heir of the saints; he walked among the beautiful things of that paradise beyond earthly understanding that is promised by the Lord. In this way the merciful and pitying Lord, as Joel says, prefers penance to evil;<sup>71</sup> elsewhere the scriptures say ‘The wickedness of the wicked *will not harm him, whenever he turns from it*’<sup>72</sup> since the Lord judges the things of the present, not those of the past, provided they are removed by a holy confession. See how easy is the pity of God, and how quick to forgive! He teaches us this in the example of the one who joined adultery to murder and who was rebuked in hidden meaning by the prophet Nathan: after hearing the riddle of the poor man’s ewe, he said ‘*I have sinned*’. Thereupon he heard ‘*And the Lord has taken your sin from you*’.<sup>73</sup> See how quickly the words of holy scripture are joined with the words confessing the sins. Elsewhere he who was tested in himself says to those same sinners: ‘*I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you have pardoned the impiety of my sins*’.<sup>74</sup> Who does not

64 a quotation from Pseudo-Theodore’s Penitential XLIII (B Thorpe *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England* (1840) II p.50) based on Isaiah 45:22

65 Isaiah 44:22

66 Isaiah 44:21–22

67 a paraphrase of Ezekiel 18:30

68 Jeremiah 15:6

69 Jeremiah 3:1

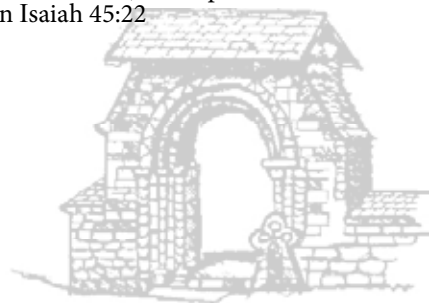
70 Luke 23:39–43

71 an allusion to Joel 2:13

72 a paraphrase of Ezekiel 33:12

73 II Samuel 11:1–12:13

74 Psalm 32:5 (Vulgate Psalm 31:5)



know of Ahab, who joined with Jezebel, that most defiled of all women, not only in marriage but in a most wicked crime? He was the author of many abominations in Israel, rendered unclean by the blood of many holy prophets of the Lord, and an accomplice in many crimes.<sup>75</sup> After he had poured out the innocent blood of Naboth in Jezreel, he was most harshly reproached by Elijah in the word of the Lord. After this violent threat Ahab was greatly afraid and changed his kingly garments to sackcloth and ashes. Behold, the word of the Lord was made manifest to Elijah, saying ‘Because Ahab has turned back to my face, *I will not bring evil in his days.*’<sup>76</sup> What else, dearest one, is shown in these divine affirmations than the many mercies of the Lord and His kindnesses, greatly sparing and pitying those who truly and deeply confess, from which He may ease the sadness of a praiseworthy end to our flesh.

8. We have seen Gilbert praying for his sins, humbly and often in tears, even in times of prosperity and good health. From his secrets we most remember this, that he told among other things to the lord prior. Because Gilbert was nearing his last day, he summoned the lord prior<sup>77</sup> to him and said thus: ‘If I deserve anything good from you, after I am gone and my body is laid out to be washed, as is customary, on no account allow a stranger or, most of all, any holy woman to come near me. If for any reason I have not released myself from this restraint, I beseech you to collect the binding, wrap it up and bury it.’ The people of his house, except only two, were unaware that for two years or more he had been bound by a great iron chain on the bare flesh around his loins. In this way he continually bore in his own body the cross of Our Lord.

I have not been silent about this, dearest brother, so that it might move your soul as it moved mine. Farewell.<sup>78</sup>

---

75 see I Kings 18:4, 13

76 a paraphrase of I Kings 21:29

77 M L Colker ‘Latin texts concerning Gilbert, founder of Merton Priory’ in *Studia Monastica* 12 (1970) p.246 understood ‘*eum*’ in the original not as referring to the prior but to Gilbert’s chamberlain, though such a character is not mentioned anywhere in the text

78 the copyist adds ‘etc’ at the end of this and the next document, presumably indicating that he, or a predecessor, had omitted some well-known concluding words. The final eight lines of this text are shown in the image from the manuscript on the front endpaper. The opening phrase and the ‘Farewell’ preserve the Classical Latin formations for a letter.



#### IV. The Vision of Walchelin<sup>79</sup>

Fourteen years after the sheriff Gilbert left this life, a vision appeared to one of the brothers, a man of venerable age and mature habits. It seemed that he stood by Gilbert's tomb with some servants and they were all trying to move Gilbert's body in its tomb but with the stone on top it was no easy task. To answer this problem the brother thought to expose the tomb by moving the stone, with the aid of the servants. After so many years there would be nothing but dry bones and nothing that might be foul to their noses. After they moved the rock he saw Gilbert lying there, covered all over with unblemished skin, although he was unusually thin and greatly pale. Soon Gilbert moved as if he wanted to leave his tomb. The brother took him in his arms and said 'What is this, my lord? Where are you going? Do you not recognise me?' 'I recognise you,' he said, 'and I know you well, for you are my dearest Walchelin, familiar to me after a long and special affection.' 'I beg you, lord, as much as is allowed, as much as it is granted to you, please tell me more about your existence.' Gilbert replied: 'I can tell you all is well with me, because I am never consigned to the infernal flames,<sup>80</sup> in which many of my companions are burned up. Every day I enter a bath, like the one your lord prior used to tell me about, which sometimes reaches up to here,' and he placed his hand underneath his head, 'and at other times completely covers the top of my head. Though this is a heavy punishment, I can explain nothing more to a mortal.' Then Walchelin replied 'My lord brother, is there not some other trouble that burdens you?' 'There is one other very great pain,' he said. 'A kind of instrument of torment, in wood and made like a collar, is put round my neck and is placed over both my shoulders. It presses down with great pain and breaks them. But why care about these pains? They seem entirely bearable to me, because I know for certain that my forgiveness will follow them.' 'You know this for certain, my lord?' 'I know,' he said, 'I know, and I have no reason to despair.' At this the brother burst into tears of overwhelming happiness, raised his hands on high, blessed the Lord and woke up, coming back to his senses. This same venerable brother reported that the wonderful sweetness, which he perceived in his sleep, remained even after he had awoken and it could be smelled for some time afterwards. Because of this it can be concluded that this unclouded vision was not some empty fantasy, but rather that it shone with the most genuine truth.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> see illustration on endpapers

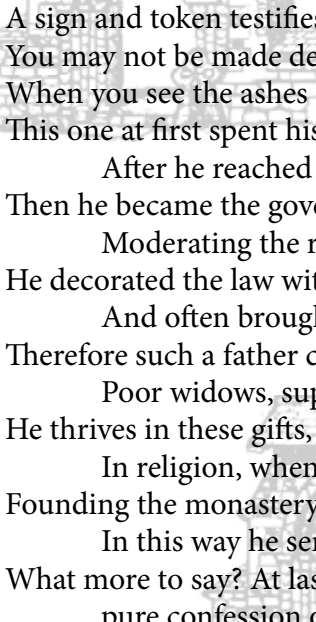
<sup>80</sup> Gilbert is spared the flames of hell, though he endures punishment in what was later defined as Purgatory

<sup>81</sup> see note 78

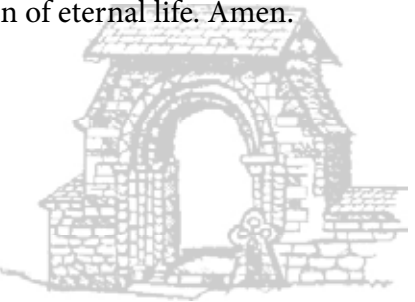
## APPENDIX

### Line by line translation of the Epitaph

If you ever come to the closed tomb, look at it and you will see this:



A sign and token testifies to the kindness of the name,  
You may not be made desirous of worldly success,  
When you see the ashes of a man of such probity:  
This one at first spent his youthful years as a soldier;  
After he reached as high as he could he went further.  
Then he became the governor of many people,  
Moderating the rule of law, rising above crimes by law.  
He decorated the law with pious habit, thought of it as a master,  
And often brought holy obedience to the law.  
Therefore such a father cared especially for  
Poor widows, supporting them with his funds.  
He thrives in these gifts, he carried out good  
In religion, whence he climbed the road to the homeland.  
Founding the monastery, pouring out piety,  
In this way he served many other churches.  
What more to say? At last he brought his  
pure confession of crimes; while he well recounted  
them he cried; he praised the Lord as he was about to die.  
Crying excessively at what he had done, he flowed with  
outpoured tears.  
The sun on eight occasions lit up the face of Leo,  
At last the late light grew dark on the hero.  
You who read my deeds and pass time here in the body,  
Led by love of God, may you remember me, I pray.  
Gilbert, may God be ever joyful about you,  
Giving you the consolation of eternal life. Amen.





*Above: College of Arms Arundel MS 28 f.19r. See translation on p.41.  
Reproduced by permission of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms*



**ISBN 978 1 903899 78 6**  
**Published by Merton Historical Society – 2019**

Further information on Merton Historical Society can be obtained  
from the Society's website at [www.mertonhistoricalsociety.org.uk](http://www.mertonhistoricalsociety.org.uk),  
or from Merton Library & Heritage Service, Merton Civic Centre,  
London Road, Morden, Surrey. SM4 5DX

