

waste land of the manor, under this new system, and of the gradual development of the rights enjoyed by the tenants of the lord of the manor over it—rights which have operated to secure its preservation to us in its present condition—forms another story which even to glance at, would take me far outside the limits allowed me for this paper.

MONTAGUE S. GIUSEPPI.

## MERTON PRIORY

A.D. 1114—1539

**T**HE story of Merton Priory is closely interwoven with that of four of the most interesting centuries of English history; and although, unfortunately, hardly any traces of the material buildings now exist, few religious houses, perhaps, have left a richer legacy of records, of which the Cartulary, preserved at the British Museum, is the most important. It is upon this and the other documents so admirably edited by Major Alfred Heales in his 'Records of Merton Priory' that we propose to found this slight sketch.\*

There appears to have been some doubt as to the exact date of the foundation of the Priory, but it seems safe to assign it to the year 1114. 'Henry (I) King of the English,' says the Chronicle of Merton, 'gave the Ville pertaining to the Crown called Meriton or Merton, to Gilbert the Knight, formerly Sheriff, to possess freely in

\* 'The Records of Merton Priory,' by Major Alfred Heales, F.S.A., F.R.S.L., etc., London, 1898.

hereditary right; in which Ville the same Gilbert most liberally built a Church at his own cost, and handsomely decorated it with paintings and other images as was customary, and magnificently caused it to be dedicated to the honour of The Most Blessed Mother of God, and Ever Virgin Mary.'

Having obtained the King's licence for the establishment of a Monastery, Gilbert invited the Canons Regular of Huntingdon Priory, who 'to his knowledge had diffused around the odour of good works,' to take possession of it. Rodbert, or Robert, then sub-Prior, accepted the offer, and accompanied by a few of the brethren came to Merton. Besides the Church mentioned above, the founder made over to them 'adjacent land sufficient for two Ploughs, and with a Mill bringing in 60s. per annum, and promising further, the domain there.' Gilbert continued to take the most generous interest in the new foundation, and applied to the Bishops and Nobles to aid in its advancement. Through his influence also, Merton was visited by Queen Matilda, who was greatly pleased by it and took hereafter much interest in its welfare. Under these happy auspices the House quickly progressed, and in about two and a half years from the time of Prior Robert's arrival the building was completed. On Ascension Day, May 3, 1117,

the Brethren, now fifteen in number, took possession of their Monastery, and entered it 'singing *Salve festa dies*, etc.—when our Lord as on this day entered the ethereal Mansions of the Father; and in this procession almost blocked up by the thronging multitude was the Founder himself right joyful.'

The Charter of Royal Foundation granted by Henry I to Merton is dated 1121-2, and it is signed not only by the King but by his royal consort, Queen Adeliza, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, fourteen Bishops and other dignitaries. Some sentences read sadly in the light of after events and show the difference in religious feeling between our first Henry and his successors of the 16th Century. The passages run thus: 'I constitute also and confirm this Ville to be absolutely free from all earthly power, exaction, vexation, and inquietude, as when it belonged to the Crown . . . and also the Church and the things which are placed there . . . and I undertake for its like defence by my royal successors, so that no secular power shall be lawful to release it from that hold,' etc. Three years after this Charter was granted Sir Gilbert died—or as the Chronicle reverently puts it, 'The Lord sent for him'—on July 29, 1125, and he was laid to rest in the Cloister he

had founded, and where he had caused his tomb to be prepared (laying the first stone of it himself) only a few months before. He had loved to visit the Brethren and to frequent the church during his life, we are told, and had a special seat in it, and his charity to the poor and wayfarers is noted; otherwise we know little of the founder's family history, save that he was of noble Norman birth and that his mother was known for her piety and charity King Henry, as well as Count Gilbert, appears to have found his last resting place at Merton, as it is related in the 'Decem Scriptores' that he died at Murtelac (Mortlake) 'and was brought to the new Church of the Canons of Merton, by John, Bishop of Rochester, and Bernard, Bishop of Llandaff.'\*

Henry II confirmed the royal grant given to Merton and likewise (about 1158) 'gave in perpetual alms, to the Canons of Merton all that he possessed in Aewella (Ewell), i.e. the Manor with all the pertinents. There are many mentions of royal visits in the Cartulary, and of favors granted to the Priory. King John was there in 1215. In January, 1236,

\* Fourteen years later, one of his friends, Brother Walthelm, had a very curious dream or vision concerning the dead founder, which is given in full in the letter of Brother Gervase of the same Monastery (See Heales, p. 7).

Henry III went thither just after his marriage, and to obtain blessings on himself and his Queen, Eleanor of Provence, he there 'granted and established some good new laws and ordered them to be for ever inviolably observed throughout his Kingdom.'

In the next century (April 12, 1336), Edward III confirmed the Charter granted by his predecessors and signed a fresh one concerning the custody of the House and its possessions during a vacancy in the Priorate. There are also other entries concerning his intercourse with Merton; such as a reference to some sports held there on the Epiphany, 1346-7, presumably for the King's amusement. 'There were supplied thirteen visers (masks) with heads of dragons, and thirteen with heads of men and having diadems,' etc., etc., and again on December 18, 1356, 'The King took fifty-two oaks from the woods near Reading, belonging to the Convent, for the Round Tables at Windsor,' paying £26 . 13 . 4 to the Prior 'in full satisfaction' for the same.

The youthful King Henry VI was crowned at Merton on All Saints' Day, 1437, and five years later, gave an important Charter to the Priory.

These facts taken from the records show the position occupied by Merton Priory in

the annals of the country. All that we know of its religious inmates is equally interesting. Of those whose saintly lives shed a lustre on its history, three names stand out pre-eminently—those of St. Thomas à Becket, St. Edmund of Canterbury and William of Wykeham. St. Thomas went to Merton at an early age in the course of the very year that the Monastery was opened—1117, and was placed under the charge of Prior Robert, who was ever afterwards his faithful friend and spiritual guide, his confessor during the time he was Chancellor, and finally the witness of his Martyrdom, but we know few details concerning Thomas's education here. There is a pretty story told, however, of his stay at Merton, showing that his father was inspired by God to recognise the future greatness of his son. One day Gilbert Becket visited the little Thomas, and as the boy entered the room he 'made a most humble reverence and obeisance to him. The good Prior indignant at this said, "Old man you are mad; what are you doing? Do you throw yourself at the feet of your son? The honour you do to him he ought to do to you." But Gilbert answered the Prior secretly, "Sir, I know what I am doing, for this boy will be great before the Lord." There is still a letter extant from 'William, son of Stephen, citizen

of London,' in which he refers to the same Prior, Ven. Canon Robert of Merton, as an authority on the life of St. Thomas and as being acquainted with the fact of the Archbishop's visits to Merton in after life, his devotions in the Priory Church, and also to his 'praying with the poor of the neighbouring villages concealed in a cloak, and accompanied by one sole companion as a guide.'

During the time of Thomas's Chancellorship Merton profited by his connection with the Priory and was favoured by King Henry, who, also, says Fitzstephen, completed the Church and endowed it, and would sometimes spend the last three days of Holy Week with the community. Nor during the Saint's exile was Merton forgotten. In 1168 we find record of a letter addressed by John of Salisbury to Prior William of Merton 'and all other Brothers, earnestly and with abasement beseeching prayers and aid for the Lord of Canterbury exiled and prescribed for the Church's cause; and a subsidy from their temporal goods.'\*

St. Edmund does not appear to have been at Merton till about the time of his ordination (1212), when he spent more than a year there in retirement preparing to give his

\* Materials for the Life of Archbishop Becket (Rec. Off. Chron. and Mem. III, p. 23).

theological lectures at Oxford. 'The fact that he chose this place for his retreat, says his biographer, 'suffices to convince us that its reputation stood very high for strict observance of religious discipline.' The Archbishop often re-visited the Priory in after days 'to refresh his spirit in the exercises of religious life.' After the Saint's death, 1241 (o.s.), the then Prior of Merton sent a letter to the Pope begging for his canonization, in which occur the following interesting references to his connection with the Religious, 'for the same Venerable father had,' it states, 'lived constantly for a year and more in their House, and afterwards for a long time dwelt as one of their fold, the Brothers delighting much in speech with him, being nourished by his counsel, and deeply aided by his conversation . . . and marvellous to state, surpassing the life of one of the secular clergy he was seen to follow not only a religious life, but even all the practices of a Religious amongst us, for he was assiduous in reading and meditation, most devout in prayer, ever constant in fastings and vigils . . . He quickly increased from strength to strength and shone forth not to the House alone—but to all. Wherefore omitting to speak of his holy conversation and ineffable goodness which many

of the Brothers personally knew, they pass,' says the letter, 'with a hasty pen to what by the merits of him beloved by all lands, was done after his death.' Then follows the account of the cure of one of the Brethren, Canon John, restored to health from a severe paralysis after praying to the Saint.

The personal connection of William of Wykeham with the Priory was apparently very slight. He retired there, however, for a short time in December, 1376, when accused of having mismanaged the King's revenues. Being 'forbidden in the King's name,' says the Chronicle, 'to come within twenty miles of the Court, he left his Palace at Southwark and retired to the Monastery of Merton, where for the most part he continued during the next month.' His official connection with the Priory is, however, recorded on two occasions in the Cartulary. The Bishop seems to have made a visitation of the Priory about 1386, in which he appears to have found fault with many things detailed in a formal injunction issued shortly afterwards, and against which the Prior and Convent protested. The Injunction is very detailed and lengthy; on perusing it, however, it will be seen that the faults mentioned were mostly slight laxities, or neglect in keeping discipline. Not a single

grave fault is suggested and we find that the paper is one of a set of similar Injunctions or Circulars sent to New College, Oxford, Selborne Priory, and others, by the Bishop.

It may be of interest to describe the ceremonies attending the election of a Prior of Merton, and we will briefly relate those regarding that of Prior John Gisborne as told in the Chronicle of 1485. On January 2 of that year Dr. John Kingston, twenty-seventh Prior, died. After receiving the royal *Congé d'élire* and communicating with the Bishop, the Religious proceeded to the election of his successor on January 14, as follows: 'On this the appointed day the Mass of the Holy Ghost was celebrated at the High Altar and then the bell rung according to custom for assembling the Chapter. In the presence of Bevil, Lacy, and Clere the Prior and Canons above-named assembled and formed a Chapter. John Gisborne, the *Cellararius* standing before them, made a solemn speech in Latin of which the theme was *Eligite Meliorem de filiis*. The speech being ended there was sung the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*, with the versicle and collect following as usually sung in this case, which being completed they nominated and assumed the venerable man Master Thomas Coke, Doctor of Laws, as Director, and the

said Master John Bevil, Notary Public, as actuary, and Baker and Lacy as Witnesses.' After certain other formalities, amongst which was the reading of the Royal Licence by Letters Patent,\* 'the sub-Prior and all the other Canons (except John Gisborne) remaining in chapter, at once, without any delay, and none dissenting, the Grace of the Holy Spirit inspiring (as they firmly believed) with one consent, with one voice, and as it appeared, with one mind, they elected the said John Gisborne to be Prior.' They caused the election to be recorded and published, 'and all devoutly said the Psalms *Deus misereatur, Beati omnes* and *Ecce quam bonum*, while leading the said John to and in the conventual Church and to the High Altar, and solemnly chanted in the usual manner the Psalm *Te Deum Laudamus*.' The election was then publicly announced in Church and afterwards the sub-Prior and the Electors nominated two of their number to be Proctors, to notify the election to the Bishop and perform other formalities. But the newly elected Prior had not yet given his consent and when the Proctors came to him 'about noon . . . in a certain upper chamber situated near the dormitory, which he as Cellarer had long occupied,'

\* Reproduced in Major Heales' book.

to announce his election, he answered that he wished for time for consideration. They therefore returned 'about three o'clock to him in a certain lower chamber, being the refectory, and again asking him with no little urgency, and in the presence of the Notary, and witnesses, at length he consented in a formal instrument, wherein he set forward that he was unwilling further to resist the Divine Will, and at the urgent request of the Chapter and their Proctors, and for the honour of God and the Blessed Mary, His Virgin Mother, the patron of the Monastery, gave his consent to the election.' This good Prior ruled the Monastery for seventeen years, dying on March 7, 1502.

We may also quote the rules regarding the rights and duties of the Prior's Sacristan, which are fully given in the Cartulary as follows: 'The Sacristan ought to have two servants and one boy. The servants shall have such allowance as they are used to have, the boy ten loaves of the boys' (choir boys?) bread, and such allowance as the boys have, and one allowance of the third beer . . . one of them ought the Sacristan to provide in August to gather in the harvest and store all the produce in the Grange in August. Also, the Sacristan shall have a full allowance for

a horse, when he has one, like a palfrey of the prior's stable. Neither the Master Sacristan nor his fellows should carry or send anything out of the Refectory; but if asked by anyone in his cell (ill apparently) he may kindly give it,' etc.

It is very unfortunate that we know hardly anything about the architecture of Merton Priory—and that there seem to be no pictures extant of the building save a copper-plate engraving, dated 1800, of a window in a gable, apparently facing northwards.\* It is of early decorated style, and dates presumably from the fourteenth century. Numerous encaustic tiles have also been found, chiefly belonging to the same date. One very interesting relic of the Priory, however, remains intact, the Priory Seal. It is considered to be one of the finest monastic seals in existence, and as it is recorded in the Cartulary we know its exact date. On December 12, 1241, the new seal was solemnly received and taken into use. This seal, of which we give an illustration, bears on the obverse a figure of the Blessed Virgin seated on the throne, the Holy Child on her left knee; the throne is carved with foliage and the corbel below is composed of a large fleur-

\* See Patent Roll 2, Richard III, p. 3, m. 9 (17).

de-lys. The Virgin is crowned, her dress richly ornamented at the neck, and in her right hand is a short staff or sceptre. The Child has a cruciform nimbus, his right hand is raised in benediction, and in his left he holds a book; above the figures there is a canopy in the form of a Church with a square central tower (Merton Priory Church?), on each side of the principal figures are the busts of a Saint or a Monk. The legend runs thus: SIGILL: ECCLESIE: SANCTE: MARIE: DE: MERITONA: On the reverse is the full length figure of St. Augustine in full pontificals with mitre and crosier, his right hand raised in blessing, and the legend: MUNDI: LUCERNA: NOS: AUGUSTINE: GUBERNA: and round the rim of the seal are the words, AUGUSTINE: PATER: QUOS: INSTRUIS: IN: MERITONA: HIS: CHRISTI: MATER: TUTRIX: EST: ATQUE: PATRONA: This seal was used up to the time of the suppression of the Priory in 1539, and it is to these sad days that we must now turn.

In the early part of his reign Henry VIII showed favour to Merton by confirming several charters given by his predecessors, and we note that letters patent concerning a gift of land to the Priory in 1513 are signed by Catherine (of Arragon), 'Queen of England and Wales (Rectrice) of the same.'



SEAL OF MERTON PRIORY  
Fourteenth Century  
*British Museum*



In the fourteenth year of Henry's reign a forced loan was assessed against all Ecclesiastical revenues, and we find that the income then possessed by the Priory was £133 . 6 . 8.

In 1532 is recorded probably the last royal visit to Merton, when, on Thursday, October 17, of that year, the Princess Mary went thither to supper; she evidently remained over Friday, and until after dinner on Saturday, when she left for Oxford. In 1535 various indications of the coming storm occur in Cromwell's correspondence, and in January, 1535 (o.s.), a proposal was made to the Prior and Convent of Merton as to 'certain exchanges' to be made by them with the King. One of these 'exchanges' was apparently that of the Manor of East Molesley to be taken by Henry in exchange for the Church of Elaston, which had previously belonged to the Priory of Calwich; 'whether this exchange was a genuine transaction, or a mere sham on the part of the King,' says Major Heales, 'is a matter of inference; Merton Priory suffered the fate of Calewiche and was dissolved two years after this date.'

The Canons of Merton had evidently long foreseen the fate that awaited them, and had apparently sought to rescue part of their property by granting long leases of their most

valuable possessions. As we know, however nothing could stem the current of Henry's avarice, and on April 29, 1539, John Ramsay, the last Prior of Merton, signed the fatal surrender of the Priory and all its belongings. We know little of Prior Ramsay but we feel assured that the words of the surrender, which assert that the Prior and Convent '*with unanimous consent and deliberate assent of will and full understanding*' give up their Priory to 'Our Lord Henry the Eighth . . . on earth supreme head of the English Church under Christ' were those of Henry's compliant councillors, and do not echo the sentiments of the victims of his injustice.

M. M. MAXWELL-SCOTT.

## WIMBLEDON WILD FLOWERS

**W**HILE the historical associations of Wimbledon are hardly so rich and of such high importance in our country's annals as those of one or two of the other suburban districts of London, it may safely be said that its natural features surpass in interest and variety those of any other similar area at a like distance from the metropolis. And, as a consequence of this, among other things Wimbledon has always been, and to a great extent still is, exceptionally rich in wild flowers.

According to my notes derived from various sources, and taking the last edition of the London Catalogue of British Flowering Plants as a basis, 572 species\* are recorded as growing about the Common, in the Park, or on the lower ground towards Merton and the Wandle. And though, unfortunately, many of these have become extinct, in all probability a dozen or

\* For a complete list of these see under MISCELLANEA at the end of the book.