

# Merton Priory: Twelfth Century Extension

by LIONEL GREEN

An interesting comment appears in the late David Knowles' book *Thomas Becket* published in 1970. On p. 41 he refers to the beneficence of Becket towards Merton Priory when the eastern limb of the priory church was built. Unfortunately the source is not quoted. The text suggests that the aid was given during Becket's period as Chancellor (1154-61). A diligent search of the seven volumes of the *Materials for the history of Thomas Becket*, transcribed but not translated in the Rolls Series No. 67, reveals a reference to the King completing the church. This appears in William Fitz Stephen's *Vita* (Robertson 1878 23), 3, which informs us that 'on the advice of the chancellor the Lord King again received into grace and friendship the canonical church of Merton where those remaining served God, and at his own cost completed the existing building [eastwards?] from the choir and transepts which had already been constructed, and enriched it with perpetual revenues'.<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that the eastern extension of the church (TQ 266699) may have taken place in the 12th century and not the 13th as concluded from the excavations at Merton in 1921-2. In his report Col. Bidder (1929, 52) acknowledged that 'a considerable search had failed to discover any documentary evidence of the 13th century extension and rearrangement.

In considering the reasons for enlarging the priory church eastward, the need for providing additional altars to offer daily masses was paramount. Other reasons were the need for space for the growing ritual in the liturgy and for increasing numbers of canons (Brooke 1969, 97).

The dedications of the following chapels are recorded in a 'Kalendar' now in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (MS 59):

1174 St John the Baptist (Heales 1898, 26)

1194 St Stephen and St Nicholas (Heales 1898, 49)

1196 Holy Cross (Heales 1898, 50)

The growth in the numbers of canons is related in various parts of the 'Historia foundationis' (College of Arms-Arundel MS 28). From its foundation of the original 'few' in 1174, it grew in the space of less than ten years to 37 (including the Prior) (Dickinson 1950, 118). Thereafter, the establishment was 40, although actual numbers varied (Heales 1898, 269).

The statement that the King enriched it with perpetual revenues is borne out by the following facts. From a situation where the Prior was negotiating

for the perpetual provision of candles in exchange for a land lease (Heales 1898, 15) and borrowing 40 marks (in 1154), using the priory's vineyards in Sutton as security (Stead 1912, 143) the prosperity of the monastery was assured soon after the accession of Henry II. The King bestowed gifts and important concessions on the canons. Among the royal grants were 40 acres of assarts at Hartley Waspall, Heckfield, Pitam (all in Hampshire) and Upton, Bucks (Heales 1898, 18, amended by Malden 1910, 209); and 50 acres at Alconbury, Hunts (Heales 1898, 19). Henry also regranted the vill of Merton and promised to 'defend the said Church from damage and disturbance'. All three of these charters were witnessed by Thomas as Chancellor and executed in Rouen, Caen and Bruges in 1156 or early 1157. In 1156, the second year of his reign, Henry gave the manor of Ewell to the canons of Merton together with the manors of Kingswood and Shelwood (near Leigh) (Heales 1898, 20).

In 1162 the King granted £26 13 4d given for the works of the Church. He also granted pasture for the canons' horses in his royal forests in England; freedom from being impleaded concerning royal tenancies; freedom of hundred rates in all places where the priory had holdings and other liberties; rights of passage and freedom of bridge tolls throughout England and Normandy (Heales 1898, 17-22).

Most of the foregoing were granted between 1156 and 1164, and in 1165 Henry seemed determined to cover all needs by giving a charter of confirmation and listing a further forty or more liberties. 'All these he granted to the canons in free and perpetual alms for the love of God and the glorious Virgin Mary, and for the soul of King Henry his grandfather, and the souls of his father and mother and the empress, and of his children and heirs' (Heales 1898, 22-3).

Further evidence for a 12th century eastern extension rests on the setting out by the master mason. A 13th century construction would have been executed in Statute feet measurements whereas 12th century work would probably have employed Norman feet (Harvey 1974, 59). The existing foundations fit into a grid system of squares of twenty Norman feet (5.95 m) and sometimes double squares. This system is apparent in other parts of the excavated portions (chapter house, cloister garth, as well as in the Norman nave).

In addition to the possible eastern extension of the church, there is evidence that other conventual buildings were also constructed at this time. The chapter house layout consists of two twenty (Norman) foot double squares with an eastern apse contained within the second<sup>2</sup>. The chapel of the infirmary was dedicated in 1161 (Corpus Christi MS 59; Heales 1898, 21; Tyson 1925, 42) and a large and important building, probably the guest house, was built soon after (Johnston 1914, 136-40).

By early in the 13th century the conventual buildings must have been very extensive, sufficient in fact to entertain the court. The King stayed at Merton for almost a week in June 1204 accompanied by the archbishop,

three bishops, the Earl Marshall, two earls and others (Heales 1898, 60). In 1217, the priory was able to accommodate the Dauphin of France, the papal legate, the Earl Marshall of England, together with most of the nobility of England and many of France for a peace conference (Corpus Christi MS 59; Lambarde 1730, 212; Tyson 1925, 43). From January 20 to 28 1236, the King continued his wedding celebrations at Merton, and for over a week the priory accommodated the King, both archbishops, six bishops, eight earls, the three royal stewards, abbots and others (PRO, *Curia Regis Rolls* 15, li, n3). While the prior was entertaining the thirty important guests, the hospitaller would have been attempting to shelter their retainers and attendants as well as scribes and clerks. And all this in January!

Some buildings were specially set aside and referred to as the King's chamber and the King's Chancellor's chamber. They were of sufficient age in 1257 to require repairing (PRO, *Close Rolls* 1256-59, 168).

Suggested building periods of Merton Priory are as follows:

#### Period I (1117-1124)

'A wooden chapel was soon built. . . some of the cells and part of the cloister were at that same time removed [to the new site]' (Dugdale 1830, 6, 243; M and B, 1, 245, quoting Arundel MS 28).

'Gilbert provided a second wooden chapel much larger than the former one' (Colker 1970, 243, quoting Arundel MS 28).

- 1121 The charter of foundation was secured 'to enable them to build a Church'—and it reserved royal protection to 'the said Church when built' (M and B 1, 243).

#### Period II (1125-1131)

- 1125 'In the year of his death Gilbert began a most beautiful and sturdy church at Merton. Because, however, this work seemed too great to certain persons, it was destroyed after his death, except part of the front, where the sheriff had laid the first stone' (Colker 1970, 244).

- 1131 Archbishop Corbeil (or Corboyle) was actively engaged in reconstructing the priory in stone (Haines 1930, 158, quoting BL Cott. MS Vespas. B XI).<sup>4</sup>

Building periods I and II occupied 15 years (Colker 1970, 251; Heales 1898, 3), i.e. from 3 May 1117.

During the troublous times of Stephen (1135-54) building work was probably in abeyance. With the coincidence of Henry's accession and Thomas' appointment as Chancellor, building work at Merton received a boost soon after 1154.

**Period III (1154-c1175)**

Sometime between 1154 and 1159 eastern limb of the church built (Knowles 1970, 41)

1161 Infirmary chapel dedicated (Heales 1898, 21)

1162/3 Henry II grants £26 13s 4d 'for the works of the church' (PRO *Pipe Rolls*, 9 Hen. II (PRS 6) 62)

c1165 Henry II completed the church and endowed it (Robertson 1878, 23). (Date relies on Heales 1898, 23.)

c1175 Important building (? guest house) completed. (Extant doorway—now relocated at the parish church. Dated by Pevsner—Nairn and Pevsner 1971, 363).

**Period IV (c1225-c1250)**

c1225 Major repairs would have been necessary following the fall of the tower in 1222 (Luard 1866, 3, 76).

1225 The King gave 'six old oaks... for the works of their church' (Heales 1898, 85).

1227 The King gave 'ten oaks for the fabric of his church' (Heales 1898, 90). (Even with vaulted roofs large timbers were required, for the structure of the roof above the stonework.)

1241 The King gave permission for the priory to possess its own quarry (Heales 1898, 106).

Temp. Hen. III. New chapel of St Mary built (Lambarde 1730, 212). (There was an altar of Blessed Mary in the Norman church (Heales 1898, 14) but this was probably the high altar.)

Archaeological evidence of 13th century rebuilding has been revealed at Merton (Bidder 1929, 62) and re-used material found at Nonsuch Palace (Biddle 1960, 151).

**NOTES**

1 The Latin text is as follows:

... iterum cancellarii consilio dominus rex canonicalem ecclesiam meritoniae ubi morantes deum merentur, in gratiam et familiaritatem recepit: et eam a presbyterio et crucibus factis susceptam sumptibus suis consummavit, et perpetuis ditavit redditibus (Robertson 1873, 3, 23).

I am grateful to the Misses E. D. and E. O. Mercer for providing the translation used in the text.

- 2 Excavation by Scott McCracken on behalf of the Surrey Archaeological Society (Aug.-Dec. 1976) at Merton has given further indications for a 12th century construction of the chapter house. The apse termination is confirmed (a style generally out of favour by the 13th century), and a quantity of 12th century pottery has been recovered inside the chapter house. The use of Norman feet cannot be established at this stage.
- 3 Two normally accepted references to Norman building work at Merton do not appear in the foregoing because doubt must be expressed as to their reliability.

- (a) Daniel Lysons (1796, 1, 341) supposedly quoted from the Merton 'Historia fundationis' Arundel MS 28. 'In the year 1130, Merton Abbey was first built with stone: the founder himself laying the first stone . . . The founder died in the same year . . .' The source document, however, gives the year in Roman numerals as 'MCXXV' and I can only assume it was misread as 'MCXXX'. Unfortunately the incorrect year has been used in the 19th century revision of Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* (6, 245), by Manning and Bray (1, 245), by Brayley (3, 457), by Malden (in *VCH* 2, 94) and most other local historians. This is important, as the date of the death of the founder in the Arundel MS is now shown to be correct.
- (b) The other suggested error is the following:  
'The canons entered the new convent in 1136, being inducted by the bishops of St Davids and Rochester, who were deputed for that purpose by archbishop Corboyle'.

This also appears for the first time in Lysons' *Environs of London* (1796, 1, 341) who gives the source as *Scriptores X*, column 1664 (Twysden 1652). The sentence has been taken out of context and refers to the new church at Dover and not Merton. A similar entry appears in column 1341 and both statements are by Gervase, a monk of Canterbury. They tell of the desire of the archbishop to replace the secular canons at Dover with regular canons. He built a new monastery and intended to introduce Merton canons to it.

Once again the mistranslation has been repeated by most local historians since Lysons. Both entries appear in *Gervase of Canterbury*, edited by Stubbs (1879-80, 1, 97 and 2, 383). Heales mentions these entries with the correct interpretation under 1136 but gives an additional inaccurate translation under 1135 purporting to be the *Scriptores X* entry. He also mistakenly suggests that the body of Henry I lay at Merton and substitutes the Bishop of Llandaff for the Bishop of St Davids. Dugdale repeats the main error and has the Bishop of St Asaph in place of St Davids (the see of St Asaph was not refounded until 1143).

- 4 This quotation has been used but with some misgiving. Haines (1930, 158) states that 'Corbeil was engaged at the same time (1131) in re-

building in stone the priory of Merton'. His source reference is BL Cott. MS Vespas. BXI. 3 which appears in Dugdale (1823, 4, 535-6). I can find no reference to Merton and remain suspicious that the author may have been influenced by the entries discussed above.

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