

Life in St. Werburgh's Abbey in the Fourteenth Century

By THE VEN. R. V. H. BURNE, M.A., F.S.A., F.R.HIST. S.

(Read 3rd December, 1958)

THE remains of St. Werburgh's Abbey are probably in a better state of preservation than those of any other monastery in England, but there is a great lack of information about what went on in them, in the church and cloisters and chapter house and refectory which are still with us today. We know what the Benedictine Rule was and what ought to have gone on there, but monks in the Middle Ages had their full share of human frailty, and did not always rise to the heights ordained for them. Therefore in order to keep them up to the mark they were visited from time to time by the bishop or his deputy, or, if the monastery had obtained exemption from episcopal control they would be visited by the papal legate or one or more abbots from other monasteries. It so happens that the reports of two visitations by the Bishop of Lichfield, those of 1315 and 1323, have been preserved in the Diocesan Registry at Lichfield and from them we can obtain a glimpse of the daily life of St. Werburgh's in the fourteenth century.

THE VISITATION OF 1315.

Proceedings generally opened with a sermon and then the bishop or his deputies examined each brother in the chapter house, beginning with the abbot. He had a long list of questions drawn up and if all the monks were asked all the questions it must have been a very tedious and long-drawn out affair.¹ At the end of it all the bishop would deliver his injunctions by word of mouth and afterwards send them in writing to the monastery, keeping a copy for himself in his registry, luckily for us. It is from Bishop Norbury's Register at Lichfield that these two visitations are known to us.²

ABSTRACT OF INJUNCTIONS OF 1315.

1. Debts are increasing and all unnecessary servants are to be dismissed. The abbot himself has too many personal servants.
2. No greyhounds or any other dogs are in future to be kept by the abbot, the monks or the secular servants of the abbey.
3. In future the abbot is to act in all great and difficult matters only with the advice of the "major et sanior pars" of the Convent.
4. No corrodies or pensions are to be granted or sold except in case of urgent necessity and then only with the advice of the Chapter.

¹There are 66 questions in the visitation of the cathedral priory of Durham in 1408 printed by Hamilton Thompson in *The English Clergy*, p. 293.

²I am indebted to Mr. Douglas Jones for the following notes.

5. The abbot shall not hold a feast except at solemn festivals, the arrival of an important visitor or other evident cause.
6. The abbot with a few selected monks is reported to have been eating meat in his own chamber on fish days, and this is to cease.
7. Due correction is to be charitably administered.
8. The officers of the house are to be appointed in chapter according to good custom.
9. The abbot is to surrender all the monies which he has received for the fabric of the church and is to receive no more.
10. The monks living on abbey manors are to be recalled to the house and other faithful stewards (laymen?) to be appointed in their place.
11. The prior is in future to remain within the precincts according to his rule. He must not, as in the past, go out hunting or make further use of bow and arrows.
12. No fashionable clothes are to be worn.
13. The prior and monks are to dine in the refectory and due silence is to be observed.
14. The abbot has bought certain legal books with the money of the house. He is to make restitution.
15. There are to be no more potations after compline.
16. Three monks have been guilty of indiscipline and are to be transferred to other houses. They are Matthew de Percyn, John de Gilbesmere and Geoffrey . . .

Now what can we learn from these Injunctions about the internal state of the monastery?

The first thing we notice is the number of them that concern the abbot. And rightly so, for all the power lay in his hands and the welfare of the community depended entirely on him. He was an autocrat over whom there was no real control. Thus we find that the abbot has run the abbey into debt, partly through keeping too many servants. When in want of money he would sell a corrody, thereby mortgaging the future; he got the cash at once, but the monastery would have to go on supplying board and lodging to the purchaser of the corrody long after the abbot was dead. Then, he would not seek the advice of the chapter in the appointment of officers or in any "great and difficult matters", and worst of all, he was inclined to put in his own pocket money which was given to him for the building fund.

It will be remembered that the choir was being rebuilt at this time by Richard the Engineer, and Burchelles as abbot has naturally had the credit for it. Now we find that it was done in spite of and not because of him. "He is not to be trusted", says the bishop in effect, "with any more contributions." Who, we wonder was the moving spirit in this work, if not the abbot. Surely not the fox-hunting prior. It must have been the sacrist who was usually in charge of repair work, or perhaps a "master of the fabric" was appointed, as was often done if the work was too big for the sacrist.

The order that prior and monks are to dine in the refectory, which seems so unnecessary to us, is dealt with below. The injunction against fashionable clothes occurs in all those visitations of which we have record. If we wonder how there could be a fashion in cowl and cassock Chaucer³ will help us to understand, and

³Penguin Classics. A new translation by Nevill Coghill.

indeed his famous picture of the monk in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* illustrates several of these injunctions.

"There was a monk, a leader of the fashions:
Inspecting farms and hunting were his passions,

This monk was therefore a good man to horse:
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.
Hunting a hare or riding at a fence
Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.
I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand
With fine grey fur, the finest in the land,
And when his hood was fastened at the chin
He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;
Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass."

Potations after compline we can sympathise with. Compline was the last service of the day and should have been followed by a silent procession up the dormitory stairs, but, writes Dr. Moorman, "the temptation—to round off their devotions with a little party in the cellarer's office may sometimes have been irresistible." Professor David Knowles writes in the same strain of—

"the almost universal practice of breaking the great silence by social drinking after Compline : when the Office was over the night was yet young: some of the obedientaries had been out all day and would not in any case rise for Matins: this and the reluctance common to all ages and callings to leave the warm precincts of cheerful day, led to gatherings which at best were irregular, and usually ended in excesses, caballing and slackness in attendance at Office."⁴

On the whole, after taking account of faults which are not mentioned and therefore presumably did not exist, and after studying the visitations of other monasteries we may say that the discipline of St. Werburgh's was fairly good and much better than that of a good many other houses which could be named.

VISITATION OF 1323.

Eight years later another Visitation was made and we are able to see how far the monastery has improved or deteriorated in the interval.

1. "We decree that the abbot for the future cause the dish with fragments to be distributed to the poor and not to others. And lest in this matter through his servants there should be fraud or collusion as hitherto has happened, we will that a monk of the house should be deputed specially for this distribution of alms by himself or another."
2. The abbot must not show favouritism in inviting the brethren to his chamber "for recreation and refreshment", and should take care that "three or at least two quarters (*partes*) of the whole college should remain each day in the refectory (*in conventu*) at meal times."
3. "We have learned that at the dwelling of the abbot himself there are greyhounds and other hunting dogs which eat the food which ought to be distributed in alms." This is forbidden.
4. As the abbot is too old to hear the confessions of his brethren other confessors should be chosen.

⁴As at Peterborough, for example, where the Prior reported that "almost every day there take place so much late watching and drinking in the evening that for this cause they that use such doings are left indisposed to celebrate on the following days, and masses are not celebrated according to the full number of the monks."

Canl. and York Soc., XXXIII, 273.

5. The following are to be dismissed from their offices for incompetence and replaced within three days by other "discreet and upright men" elected by the brethren. They are Metatus, the sub-cellarer; William of Chester, the sub-sacrist; John of Worth, the almoner, and Robert of Capenhurst, keeper of the fabric and overseer of the kitchens. These are "to devote themselves once more to reading in the cloister, to discussion and to the performance of good works.
6. All office-holders to render their accounts each year.
7. All obedientiaries at meal time shall have their allowance (*liberatio*) placed before them wherever they may be in the monastery, outside the refectory and not with the abbot; they must not dare to sell or give away any part of it, and any remnants shall be distributed to the poor by the almoner.
8. Brothers Roger Lauton, Walter Peweyn and Alexander Asthull are accused of incontinence and violence and are suspended from "any external administration" until the charge is either proved or dismissed. Walter Peweyn, who has not been able legally to purge his innocence, must remain within the bounds of the cloister and is forbidden to talk with any women, not even his own relations, except in the presence of some senior member of the convent, "until he shall deserve to obtain grace and favour from us."
9. Brother Peter (?), the sub-prior, is dismissed from his office and "another suitable person to be substituted in the storeroom in his place."
10. "The sons of rich men shall not be allowed to be supported by alms out of goods (*bonis*) set aside for the use of the poor."
11. No monk shall go outside the monastery without the leave of the sub-prior, and even then he must have with him a "brother in good repute for his habits of life as a witness to his behaviour."
12. No money to be given to any brother for buying clothes etc., "for this seems to induce a hope of some ownership of property." Instead, two monks to be chosen to procure and distribute the "necessaries to each out of the money set aside for the use of the brethren."
13. The constitution of the Lord Ottobon, lately Papal legate, to be read twice a year in public chapter.⁵
14. Some monks, "thinking themselves of more importance and better standing than others, wear belts and knives unnecessarily ornamented, and further are not in the least ashamed to wear in the dormitory more clothing (*apparatus*) than their brethren." This "abominable disease" is forbidden.
15. All monks when resident in the monastery shall be present daily at chapter, collation, and compline, and shall not betake themselves to any place outside the monastery without special leave: "and it is our wish that leave of this kind be not granted."
16. Two companions, or at least one, "be sent to join Brother Robert of Marketon at Hildburghesley—for if he should fall there is none to lift him up." He would do well to release himself from his vow to be an anchorite, which he took before he entered into "religion."
17. The abbot has had deputed to him, in consequence of his "well-known bodily weakness" the prior and cellarer as coadjutors, "who are oftentimes commended for their austere behaviour and faithful way of life."

Comparing this visitation with that of eight years ago we notice, perhaps with some surprise, that there is not much repetition of the same faults. There is no mention, for example, of the need for economy or the sale of corrodies or the misappropriation of money by the abbot. It looks as though the Bishop's injunctions

⁵"Otto and Ottoburn, whose reforming decrees in 1217 and 1268 remained classic for almost three centuries." Knowles, *Mon. Eng.*, p. 426

had taken effect or perhaps his increased feebleness—he was too feeble to hear confessions—accounts for this, and the prior and cellarer are told off to help him. This can hardly be the sporting prior of 1315, for he is commended for his austerity. Presumably the monks living on the manors have been recalled, as they are not mentioned again. All this is to the good. On the other hand the hounds are still kept and are eating the scraps which should have been given to the poor. Also there is the same avoiding of the refectory and the same craving for additions to their dress. The new and more serious feature is the incompetence of some of the under-officers, including the sub-prior, and there are three cases of incontinence. Other points of interest will be dealt with under separate headings.

ALMSGIVING

We notice that what are called alms were scraps of food left over from meals and this is the only kind of alms referred to in the Provincial Statutes. These scraps were to be collected and handed to the almoner to be given to the poor at the abbey gate, but the servants could not be trusted to do this, for they used to take the food home or give it to their friends. Sometimes this was done with the knowledge and consent of the almoner, for the Provincial Statutes of 1277 laid down that “In future it shall not be lawful for almoners or other obedientaries to support their workpeople or servants with alms or even to let them see them,” and “whenever the convent is at dinner or supper, let the doors of the monastery (*claustrum*) be closed, and as far as the lay out (*dispositio*) of the place permits seculars be prevented from entering.”

We see now why hounds were forbidden! not because hunting was forbidden—the monks had the right to hunt not only the fox and hare, but also the deer in the royal forest—but because the hounds ate the scraps which were intended for the poor.

The other form of charity which the abbey dispensed was the money left them in trust by will, and this was generally distributed in food on the anniversary of the death of the benefactor. This was the chief contribution that the monasteries made to the relief of the poor, though some of them gave small contributions from their own funds occasionally. In view of the popular belief that the dissolution of the monasteries by depriving the poor of the relief they were accustomed to receive was one of the contributory causes of the vagrancy of Elizabeth I's reign and her subsequent Poor Law, it is necessary to say that monastic poor relief was spasmodic in its operation, restricted in its locality and hardly cost the monastery anything.

USE OF THE REFECTORY

In both visitations the monks are enjoined to feed in the refectory: if not all of them at least three quarters or a half. This calls for some explanation. What was the objection to dining in the refectory, and where else would they dine? The explanation is that St. Benedict in his Rule laid down that no meat was to be eaten in the monastery except in the infirmary. This was not a great hardship in the warm

climate of Italy and the other countries bordering the Mediterranean, but in the colder countries of Northern Europe it was found to be a difficult rule to keep. It was therefore evaded by equating the monastery with the refectory. If, they argued, no meat was served in the refectory the rule had been obeyed, and the monks felt themselves free to eat it anywhere else, in the infirmary, the kitchen, the cellarer's office or any other private room. The abbot was allowed meat on his table because he often had to entertain guests from outside, and that was why the monks looked forward to an invitation to dine with him and grumbled if he always asked the same favoured few. This evasion of the Rule had to be winked at by the visitors, who however, always tried to secure a fair attendance in the refectory—at least half should be present, they said. It was about this time that the custom grew up of building a special room, called significantly the misericord (pity-room), often near or above the common refectory.

THE OBEDIENTIARIES

These were the officers of the house or heads of departments mentioned in the Visitation of 1315 and they formed a most important class in the monastery. The chief of them were the Sacrist, the Cellarer, the Kitchener, the Almoner, the Precentor, the Chamberlain, the Infirmarian, and the Refectorian with their assistants. These were in addition to the Prior, Sub-Prior and sometimes the Third Prior. When building was going on which was too much for the Sacrist to manage, a Master of the Fabric was appointed. Evidently there was some building going on in 1323. These officials should have been appointed by the abbot with the consent of the chapter but it was not unusual for the abbot to make the appointment by himself, for the Provincial Statutes of 1277 laid it down that:—

“It is not lawful for abbots to create an Obedientary for themselves in his own chamber or elsewhere than in Chapter, nor to bestow any offices by favouring; but offices are committed to faithful and discreet monks, though not in perpetuity: and when they are removed from their posts they must resign without difficulty or murmuring.”

The obedientiaries had certain privileges, for in view of their administrative duties they were excused the ordinary routine of services,⁶ they might have their meals outside the refectory, and some of them were allowed to visit and inspect the manors from which their department drew its income, and even, as we have seen from the 1315 injunctions, to take charge of them for a considerable period.

Chaucer in *The Shipman's Tale* refers to this visiting of manors:

“He saw his abbot and he got permission,
Being a man of prudence and position,
In fact a superintendent, one to ride
Inspecting abbey granges far and wide.”

⁶At Peterborough a century later the sacrist, cellarer, almoner and custos “come to queir only on certain feasts.”
Cant. and York Soc., XXXIII, p. 273.

Earl Ranulf III gave a house in each of his manors to be at the disposal of the visiting monk.

POSSESSION OF PROPERTY

In spite of the fact that the monks had taken a vow of poverty and that their Rule strictly forbade any of them to hold private property, yet they found the craving for possessions too strong for them and they were always hankering after them or after the money wherewith to buy them. The strength of the demand can be measured by the statutes which were passed against it by the Provincial Chapter. As early as 1219 a *propriarius* was classed with conspirators, thieves and false accusers and sentenced to excommunication. In 1277 the abbot who was to appoint four confessors for the convent was to reserve all cases of property-owning, incontinency and disobedience for himself, in other words breaches of their threefold vow.

The same statutes strictly forbade the chamberlain to give out money with which to buy clothes in lieu of the clothes themselves, and if a monk is found with property at his death, "no oblation will be made for him and he will not be buried among the brothers."

In 1323 we see the Bishop of Lichfield still opposing the demand for money because "it seems to induce a hope of some ownership of property." Later on in the century the Provincial Chapter was putting out among its Articles of Inquiry such questions as "Whether they receive money for food and clothes contrary to the Benedictine Chapter" and "Whether twice a year search is made in the dormitory and other places to see if any monk has property of any kind", but it was all of no use, and in the fifteenth century the bishops gave up the struggle, permitted a money allowance for clothes and pocket money and even made friends with the mammon of unrighteousness by instituting a system of fines for non-attendance in choir and for other failings. What lay behind the desire to buy their own clothes was the growing tendency to abandon the uniform of the Order altogether and buy themselves bright and fancy garments.

This explains the injunctions against fashionable clothes in both 1315 and 1323.

THE HERMIT OF HILBRE ISLAND

We cannot pass from these visitations without a glance at that picturesque character living alone on Hilbre Island. St. Werburgh's cell here was supposed to be manned by two monks who tended the light given and endowed by John (le Scot) Earl of Chester (1232-37). But Robert of Marketon had taken the vows of an anchorite before he became a Benedictine and he seems to have thought that he could combine these two contrary ways of life. The bishop thought otherwise.

On the whole St. Werburgh's still compares favourably with other monasteries which were visited about this time and maintains a good average standard, "a

decent mediocrity." Three of their faults are common to nearly all the monasteries. Meat-eating, the desire for clothes-money and the failure of the abbot to produce accounts. On the other hand there is no mention at St. Werburgh's of widespread immorality, of the presence of women in the cloister, or of slandering and back-biting among the brethren, though the last-named vice must have been a great temptation among men living so close together and having so little else to talk about. That it was a common fault is clear from the way it was legislated against. The statutes of 1277 laid down that "any monk or lay brother who maliciously disparages a monk or lay brother or impudently upbraids him—shall be beaten three days in Chapter and go last for a month." If it is an abbot or prior who is slandered the offender is to be sent to another monastery, his own monastery paying for his keep at the rate of a shilling a day.

What these visitations do show us is that "the August sunshine is beginning to wane to December." It is only natural that, human nature being what it is, there should be a decline from the high standard of the eleventh century. But the decline has not proceeded very far as yet at Chester and it is still possible for those who wish to do so to live if not an ascetic at least a devout life.