

BERMONDSEY PRIORY: A NOTE ON THE DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

As with other religious houses, the documentary sources for Bermondsey consist of the 'standard' sources generated by central and local government, and those produced by (and surviving from) the house itself. In the first category, coverage is generally better for Bermondsey than for many of its sister-houses in the area. The Patent Rolls and Close Rolls, recording day-to-day royal decisions and directives, the Fine Rolls and 'Miscellaneous Inquisitions' are all particularly full, the Patent Rolls containing an exceptionally large body of material for the late 13th and 14th centuries, as do the Close Rolls for the 15th century. In the case of the Patent Rolls the explanation for this richness is not hard to find: during the period in question Bermondsey priory was a matter of recurrent concern and trouble to the Crown. As an alien priory, belonging to an alien order and an alien mother house, it had little effective control over its finances, resources or inmates, and throughout the wars with France it was in the king's hands as enemy property, while on top of all this the priory and its surrounding lands were frequently flooded by the Thames. In each of these respects it was constantly coming to the king's attention for special treatment of one kind or another. On the evidence of the subsequent decrease in mentions in the Patent Rolls, these problems all but vanished overnight once the priory was removed from foreign possession and supervision and became an abbey. Even the flooding now features less prominently.

Another way in which Bermondsey was especially favoured by the Patent Rolls, and even more by the Close Rolls, is in the detail they provide of the *corrodies* that the house was regularly called upon to provide for retired servants of the royal household. This is less easy to explain, unless by the fact that Bermondsey was closer to the City and Westminster than many of the other male regular houses in this series and that much more sought after. In practically every other respect, however, the records of central government are disappointing during the period before the Dissolution.

The registers of the diocesan bishops of Winchester provide less topographical information about Bermondsey than about other houses, largely because visitations were more often undertaken by Cluny than by the bishops. No doubt also the institutional and financial problems that the visitors encountered claimed more of their attention than the state of the fabric.

As if by way of compensation, an unusual amount of detail of the precinct, its buildings and surrounding lands, is available from the period immediately after the Dissolution. Particulars for grants (especially those relating to Sir Robert Southwell in 1540–41 and Sir Thomas Pope in 1543). These, along with royal grants, Chancery decrees and proceedings (these last two sources exceptionally full for the abbey site in the later 16th century), refer in greater or lesser detail to almshouses or hospice, infirmary, bakehouse, brewhouse, larder, kitchen, monks' cemetery, cloister, belltower, dormitory, prior's/abbot's house, refectory, to several tenements within the close, the precinct's north, east and west gates; and adjoining pastures, meadows, orchards and gardens. Stow's coverage of Bermondsey is also exceptionally good, again clearly on account of its proximity to the City.

The sources generated by Bermondsey itself are equally variable in quantity and quality. In the first place, a few fragments apart, there is no surviving cartulary comparable with those for Merton or St Mary Clerkenwell, nor any priory rentals or accounts to compare with those

for (say) St John Clerkenwell or (again) St Mary Clerkenwell. Among the survivals from the abbey's archives may be noted a single sheet of expenses incurred during a vacancy in 1418 (PRO SC6/1107/11) and concerned only with the house's City properties, and an account roll at the British Library detailing priory expenditure during the period Easter 1391 to Michaelmas 1392 (Graham 1937, 148–9). One survival (albeit indirect) of the abbey's records unrivalled by any of its fellow houses in the area is the collection of priory deeds preserved in the Exchequer's 'Ancient Deeds' series: these are particularly rich in material relating to local Bermondsey and Rotherhithe topography.

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