

The History of the Monastery of St. Mary de Pré.

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There is nothing now but a slight unevenness of the ground a little way down on the right hand side of the Gorhambury drive, to indicate the site of the Benedictine Nunnery of the Blessed Mary of Pré, or the Blessed Mary of the Meadows, but it is surprising, considering the smallness of the Monastery, to find so much documentary evidence as we do, concerning it. From this, I propose to sketch briefly the history of the Monastery, and to attempt to show how the Nuns lived, and how they occupied their time. It is to be hoped that at some future time excavations may be made on the site, and a ground plan of the buildings obtained, so little being at present known of these small English Nunneries.

The story of the foundation of Pré, told by Matthew Paris, is as follows:—A poor man of the town of St. Albans, in 1178, had a dream in which St. Alban appeared to him and revealed the place of sepulchre of St. Amphibalus. Upon examining the spot indicated, the relics of this Saint are said to have been found between two of his companions. As the relics were being brought from Redbourn to St. Albans, the Monks of the Abbey went out in procession to meet them with the Shrine of St. Alban, which, when it approached the relics of St. Amphibalus, became so light that it could be carried by two brothers, “yea, even by one, without difficulty,” while at other times it was so heavy that it could be scarcely moved, so strongly was the Holy Martyr attracted to his teacher and master. Some ten or twelve years afterwards a certain faithful man of Walden, we are told, while calmly reposing in deep slumber, had a vision, in which there appeared to him a venerable cleric bright as a ray of sunlight, who stated that he was St. Amphibalus, the master and converter of the Blessed Alban, proto-martyr of the English, in whom he was well pleased and in whose glory he was glorified, and after referring to the attraction which the place where his relics rested had to the Shrine of St. Alban, the visionary Saint added “Go therefore to Abbot Warin and tell him from me that the same place should be honoured with

fitting reverence." Upon the Saint's messenger relating his vision, the Abbot determined to honour the spot by building there a church. And being apparently a man of impulse and energy, he, within a very short space of time, completed the buildings, endowed the Monastery, put in religious persons and instructed them in religion, lest anyone should say of him that he commenced to build but was unable to complete his work. He dedicated the church to the Blessed Mary, and made John de Warden, son of the messenger of Saint Amphibalus, the first master and proctor, who, although a layman, by preaching to the more simple, instructed many, and calling upon them to follow virtue, he refrained himself from vice. Abbot Warin having completed the buildings brought there leprous Nuns, restricting them within certain bounds lest they should be entangled in the errors of the world, and keeping them removed from the leprous men at St. Julian's.*

By a charter dated 15 September, 1194, the Abbot granted to the monastery of Pré the place in which their church was built together with the monastic buildings on both sides of Watling Street, certain procurations, the first and last loaf at every baking, licence to grind corn at certain mills, thirteen old garments of the Monks yearly, and certain alms, corrodies, etc. He also provided that their chaplain should have daily from St. Albans Monastery a loaf of a monk, two measures of ale of a monk, and two dishes from the kitchen of the Guest-house, and their clerk, a loaf of an esquire, one measure of ale of a knight, and one dish from the kitchen of the Guest-house, also that the same chaplain and clerk should receive yearly a mark from the church of Walden and half a mark from the church of Newham. He further endowed the house with the tithe from the lordship of Luton, and the tithe from the rent of the Stone House upon the wall of the cemetery of St. Albans, certain rents in Cambridge, pannage for pigs and provender for horses, a certain woodland, called Coppedethorn, with firewood, and some other tithes. The charter ends with the abbatial curse: if any one presume to take anything from the Abbot's gifts, let his

* It would appear from the wording of the Gesta that there were both men and women at St. Julian's.

name be erased from the Book of Life and let him participate in perpetual punishments with Judas, the betrayer, Amen. As all the possessions granted belonged to the Abbey of St. Alban, Abbot Warine was much blamed for impoverishing the Abbey in order to found Pré. King John, who is not usually accredited with very much liberality, was the greatest royal benefactor to this priory. On 14 June, 1199, he granted to the church there, the right to hold a fair yearly on the vigil and feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Mary the Virgin,* which fair was held yearly at Romeland in St. Albans. Also on 1 May, 1204, he gave to the same church 60 acres of land about St. Albans,† and again on 18 May, 1215, he granted a protection to the inmates.‡ The next mention I have found in chronological order concerning the House of Pré is the consecration of the cemetery there, which was performed by the Bishop of Down during the Abbacy of William de Trumpington (1214-1235). Under Abbot Warine's charter, Richard, the keeper of the House of Pré, on the death of Abbot Trumpington in 1235, claimed a corrody, or a supply of meat and drink for one person, as had been supplied upon the deaths of former Abbots, which was granted to him.

About this time the house of Pré appears to have become very poor and the buildings dilapidated, so that in the account given in the Gesta of the visitation of the Bishop of Norwich by order of the Pope and Henry III., for the taxation of the tithe to be granted for the Crusade, it is described as the Church of St. Mary de Pratis, where the poor women scarcely have the necessaries of life. Possibly at the intercession of this Bishop, Pope Alexander IV. came to the assistance of the house and issued a Bull in 1255, granting 40 days' indulgence to such persons as should contribute towards the repair of the buildings, and again in the two following years similar bulls were issued.

I have seen no record relating to the House of Pré for nearly a hundred years after this date, and as, about the middle of the fourteenth century, there commences a series of the accounts of the Priory, made up yearly, and

* Dugdule, Vol. III., p. 355.

† Charter Roll, 5 John.

‡ Pat. Roll, 16 John.

preserved at the Public Record Office*, which illustrates the life within its walls, it may be well to digress here from the chronological order of events and consider how the inmates of Pré lived.

First with regard to the buildings, as there are now no indications of the position of any of these, I cannot lay before you a ground plan, but speaking generally the plans of most nunneries were similar, adapting themselves, of course, to local requirements. There was the cloister, around which the various buildings ranged. The church was usually to the north, running, of course, east to west, the chapter house on the east side, with probably a parlour or hall adjoining, and over these was the dorter or sleeping apartments, on the south was usually the frater or dining-hall, and on the west were the guest chambers, kitchens, etc. Mr. William Brown, in a paper upon small Yorkshire nunneries, which he contributed to the *Yorkshire Archæological Journal* (Vol. IX.), states that most of the chambers were comfortless abodes, plastered inside, and weather boarded out, few of them had fireplaces, and in some cases the windows were unglazed, and were placed with an utter disregard to what was under or above them. The cloister walk or ambulatory was, however, sometimes glazed in the Yorkshire priories.

With reference to Pré, I have found mention in the accounts before referred to, of the church with the chancel of the Nuns and Sisters, the cloisters, the chapter house with the great solar or dormitory over it, the chamber of the Nuns, the house of the Sisters, the ambry or almonry, the great hall, the red hall, the chamber of the guest house, the frater, the hall of the Prioress, the wardrobe, the rere dorter, the kitchen, the laundry house, the stable, the dove house, the cemetery of the Nuns and Sisters, the garden, etc. The buildings had apparently all of them tiled roofs and the windows were all glazed. There appear also to have been fire places in the dormitories as there are items for coals to be expended there. The Monastery was possessed of a clock, the cost of the repair of which occurs on the account for 1461.

* Ministers' Accts., Bdle. 867, Nos. 21 to 37, dating from 15 Edw. III. to 2 Rich. III.

Concerning the inmates of the buildings we obtained some little information from these rolls of accounts. At first the house was ruled by a master and was merely a hospital for leprous women, but as leprosy died out in this country, it became purely a monastic establishment. The masters or wardens continued to manage the affairs of the priory till the middle or end of the fourteenth century, but after that time till the Dissolution of the House the direction of all its affairs devolved upon a prioress as in an ordinary Nunnery. I find, however, in the Bulls of Pope Alexander IV., on behalf of the priory, as early as 1255, and also in the early ministers' accounts, there is mention of the Prioress of Pré at the same period as the house was under the rule of a master. At the time of the foundation of the hospital there were apparently only leprous sisters there, with probably a professed superior to take charge of them. Shortly afterwards, however, there were two classes, namely Nuns and Sisters, and these continued down to the Abbacy of Thomas de la Mare of St. Albans, whose sister Dionisia, as she is called in the Gesta, or Alice in the accounts of Pré, became a professed Nun of this house in 1342, when she paid 2*li.* at her entry. This lady, from the position of her brother, probably became prioress. Shortly after he was elected Abbot of St. Albans, Thomas de la Mare altered the constitution of the house, doing away with the remains of its character as a hospital and making it purely a Nunnery. He ordained that the Sisters, the successors of the leprous women, should become Nuns and from thenceforth no more Sisters should be received. And whereas the greater part of the Nuns had been illiterate and so unable to say the services, he ordained that the then present and future Nuns should learn to read, that they might say the services at the canonical hours, and for this he gave them six or seven ordinals from the Monastery of St. Alban. He further commanded that from thenceforth all the Nuns should profess the rule of St. Benedict in writing in the presence of the Archdeacon of St. Albans, or a Monk to be appointed by the Abbot. It is about this time, viz., in 1357, that there is the last mention, I can find, of the Master or Warden of the house, and the Prioress takes his place in all deeds and charters and in the control of the Monastery and all its possessions, and

this was the date, I fancy, at which the house was changed from a Hospital to a Nunnery. As to the number of inmates, I find that at the time of the foundation provision was apparently made for 13 Sisters; in 1341 there were four Sisters and about as many Nuns; in 1352 mention is made of the Prioress and eight Nuns, the number of Sisters not being given. After the abolition of the class of Sisters, the number of Nuns was about ten. From 1482 to 1484 there were a Prioress and nine Nuns besides a novice. Before the alterations by Abbot de la Mare, the household consisted, besides the Master, Prioress, Nuns, and Sisters, of a Chaplain who received 20s. a year, a clerk receiving 4s. a year, a master groom receiving 5s. a year, two officers called tenators, whose duties were apparently similar to those of a steward or bailiff, two huntsmen, one carter, one shepherd, one cowherd, one porter, two maidservants for the house, and one maidservant especially for the Nuns, a man called the "Preyman," two ploughmen, and a barber. All these received yearly wages and lived in buildings adjoining the Monastery. I find also items in the accounts for repairs to the chambers of brothers John de Fluttewyh, John le Potter, and others who were probably corrody men receiving board and lodging at the Monastery in consideration of a sum paid down or other gift to the house. After the reconstitution by Abbot de la Mare, the household consisted of a Prioress, a Sub-Prioress, Nuns, and Novices, a Chaplain, a Steward of the Household, a man-cook, and the other out-door servants before mentioned. The Prior of Redbourn also used to come over regularly at certain times of the year to hear the confessions of the Nuns, when he received entertainment at the Nunnery. In the latter half of the fifteenth century some ladies appear to have received board and lodging at the Pré, for protection, probably, during the troublous times of the Wars of the Roses.

The Nuns wore the habit of the Benedictine order, which was a black robe with an under tunic of white or undyed wool, and when they went into the choir they wore a black cowl similar to that of the Monks. They kept daily the canonical hours, which consisted of the service of Matins at 3 a.m., or at some Monasteries at

5 a.m., immediately after which was Prime. Tierce was at 9 a.m., then High Mass, succeeded by Sext, which lasted about 20 minutes. They had leisure till 11 a.m., when they dined, and at mid-day Nones was celebrated, which lasted for about 20 minutes. They then had recreation for an hour and worked or read till 3 p.m., when Vespers began and lasted for about an hour, this being followed by meditation for another hour in the choir. Supper was at 5 p.m., after which came Compline, the last service of the day. This was ended about 8 p.m., when silence was rung for retirement to bed. Fosbrooke tells us the singing of the English Nuns was exquisite, and a welcome sound it must have been to the weary travellers and pilgrims journeying along the Watling Street, the main road from the south-east to the north-west of England, to hear the Nuns chanting Compline, and to know they could obtain rest and shelter for the night. The chapter was held every Thursday before Sext, when the affairs of the house were discussed, confession made, penance enjoined, and discipline administered. But the rules as to the daily life in the Nunnery, the services in the church, penances, &c., are too long to enter upon here, those of the Nuns of the Bridgetine order, which were founded upon the Benedictine, are fully set out in Aungier's History of Sion. Manual labour was enjoined, but the principal industrial occupation of the inmates of Pré, recorded upon these accounts, and that a somewhat sordid one, was making beer, for which Sister Isabella Ruthersfeld appears to have become noted during the middle of the fourteenth century. The candles for use in the church and monastery were also made in the house. Attached to the Nunnery was a large farm, the stock of which in 1353 consisted as follows:—16 cart horses, whereof 2 died, one was diseased and one stolen; 7 oxen, whereof 2 were slaughtered for the larder and 2 sold: one bull; 13 cows, whereof 2 were slaughtered for the larder and one sold; 2 calves; 3 heifers which were slaughtered for the use of the house at Christmas; 49 sheep, 20 of which were slaughtered for the larder; 56 ewes; and 40 pigs, 6 of which were eaten by the household. There was also a laundry attached to the House, in which possibly the Nuns and Sisters worked, and as I have found an item for needles in a late account, it is probable that garments were made for the poor. There

is, however, no evidence of the Nuns being employed upon embroidery, tapestry, or silk weaving as in some other English Nunneries. From these accounts it would also appear that the Nuns and Sisters fared well as regards food and drink. On the six principal festivals of All Saints, Christmas, Purification, Easter, Pentecost, and the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, they had great feasts, at each of which in 1352-3 the Nuns received 60 flagons of ale. "And let it be known," the accountant adds, "that they ought to receive at every feast 100 flagons besides the ale brought in the town on the day of the obit of Richard Bosard." We must hope this ale was of a mild character, for a hundred flagons for a dozen ladies at one feast seems a rather large allowance. Besides these there are the charges in the accounts for feasts at several other church festivals, and also for "Wasseyll" at Christmas, and Twelftide, "Bonfyreale" and "Mawndyale." Every year we find that a store of salt fish was laid up from Stourbridge Fair. In these accounts the charges for food include such items as meat, fish, eels, olive oil, milk, wine, spices, salmon, red herrings, geese, fowls, butter, eggs, cheese, "cawdell," almonds, &c. A few other noteworthy items in the accounts are as follows:—On the roll for 1341-2 for a pastoral at Easter; for 1356-7, paid to Richard Bonere, not to carry off two servants of the Nunnery, because they were villeins of the Earl of Warwick, 2s.; for 1461-2, 20s. given to divers soldiers coming with Queen Margaret from the east. This was probably after the second battle of St. Albans, and these soldiers some of the remnant of the Lancastrian Army fleeing to the north. The whole yearly income of the Nunnery varied during the 14th and 15th centuries from about 40*li.* to 70*li.* a year. In the account for 1341-2, the receipts amounted to 55*li.* 6s. 3½*d.* and expenses to 46*li.* 5s. 5*d.*, out of which they spent 4*li.* 3s. 8*d.* on wages and salaries, 12*li.* 4s. 7*d.*, or not a quarter of this expenditure on food, and 1*li.* 12s. 4¼*d.* on clothing. In 1484-5 (a hundred and forty years later) out of a total expenditure of 65*li.* 13s. 8*d.*, they spent on wages 13*li.* 4s. 9*d.*, on food 29*li.* 7s. 3*d.*, or under a half of their expenditure. Considering the increase of the price of food this would not warrant an accusation of very greatly increased luxury in living. As regards charity and hospitality, they had

little to expend, but every year they distributed to the poor on the feast of St. Roman, on the feast of the dedication of their church, and on Maunday Thursday 60 loaves, and each year there are recorded in their accounts some expenses of the guests. There is one peculiarity which appears by these rolls of accounts, and that a satisfactory one, which is that they almost invariably show a balance on the right side to be carried forward. In my experience, both of ancient monastic accounts and modern charitable ones, the balance is generally on the other side.

But to return to the history of the Priory. In 1416, Henry V. granted to the Priory of Pré the reversion, after the death of Joan, Queen of England, of the priory or manor of Wenge in Buckingham, a cell of the Abbey of St. Nicholas of Angers in Normandy, and which had been dissolved as an alien priory on account of the war with France.* The expenses of this confirmation are set out in the accounts before referred to. They are as follows:—3*s.* 4*d.*, the expenses of the Lady Prioress going and returning to and from London; 4*s.* to William Ball for writing the petition to the King; 6*s.* 8*d.* to the Attorney of the King; 8*li.* 9*s.*, fee for the Letters Patent; 13*s.* 4*d.* for enrolling the same in Chancery; 20*d.* paid for wax; 6*s.* 8*d.* to the clerk of the Parliament; and 21*s.* 4*d.* for enrolling in the Exchequer and for divers writs.

Henry VI., in 1440, confirmed the privilege which the Priory had of being exempt from payment of subsidy† Both these grants were confirmed in 1461 by Edward IV.,‡ on account, it is stated, of the poverty and need of the Priory.

Towards the close of its existence, the Priory obtained an evil reputation. At Cardinal Morton's Visitation of St. Albans Abbey in 1489,§ Abbot Wallingford is accused of having admitted a married woman living in adultery to be a Sister of the Monastery of Pré, and of having made her Prioress, and also of permitting the monks to visit the Nunnery for licentious purposes, with impunity.

* Pat., 4 Hen. V. m. 20, and Pat., 8 Hen. V. m. 26.

† Pat., 19 Hen. VI., p. 1, m. 31.

‡ Pat., 1 Edw. IV., p. 2, m. 11.

§ See Lectures on the Council of Trent, by J. A. Froude, p. 22. Pré is there wrongly spelt Bray.

There is little more to add to the history of the Priory of Pré. When Wolsey became Abbot of St. Albans, it seems he found the priory in a neglected condition, and he caused a jury to be impannelled to inquire into its state. On April 28th, 1528, the jurors made return that a certain monastery or priory of nuns of the Order of St. Benedict, was founded by the progenitors of the Lord the King at Pré, and was called the monastery or priory of St. Mary de Pré, and that a certain Lady Elienora Barnarde was lately prioress of the same, and afterwards, on June 4th, 1527, she died at the same monastery, after whose death no prioress had been elected. At the time of the death of the said prioress, there were in the monastery three nuns, who after her death retired from the same monastery, leaving it wholly destitute as a place profane and desolate, whereby divine service, obsequies, alms, and other works of piety, which, according to the foundation, ought to be performed, given, and done, have wholly ceased from the death of the same prioress. The jurors then set out the possessions of the priory.* Wolsey, upon this report, applied to Pope Clement through Stephen Gardiner, then his secretary, for a Bull, to suppress the priory and to annex its possessions to St. Albans Abbey. The Bull was obtained in 1528, and after reciting the relaxation of discipline which it is said existed at Pré, authorised its suppression and annexation to St. Albans. The king, however, on July 3rd, 1528, granted the monastery with all its possessions to Wolsey himself. In the meantime Wolsey's scheme for the Colleges at Oxford and Ipswich, commonly known as Cardinal's Colleges, came to the fore, and Wolsey wrote to Peter Vannes asking him to obtain another bull authorising the annexation of Pré to Cardinal's College, Oxford, now known as Christ Church; but without waiting for a reply to his request, Wolsey appears to have granted the house and its possessions for the development of his pet scheme of a new college at Oxford. Upon the attainder of Wolsey in 1529, the endowments of Cardinal's Colleges were seized by the Crown, as though they had been Wolsey's private property. Pré was leased out by the Crown, at first to

* Chan. Inq., P.M., Hen. 8, Cardinals Bdle. 1.

Thomas Abraham, a merchant of London, and then, on 19th March, 1530, to Richard Raynshaw, yeoman of the King's Guard, for a term of thirty years. Henry VIII. afterwards, on 30th September, 1531, made an exchange with the Abbot of St. Albans, the Abbot taking the possessions of Pré, except Weng and Swanburne, and the King the Abbey lands of More, Bachwood, &c.* Upon the dissolution of St. Albans Abbey, the site of Pré Monastery was granted to Ralph Rowlatt.

I have compiled an incomplete list of masters and prioresses of Pré.

A List of Masters of St. Mary de Pré.

John de Walden, 1188.

Richard, 1235.

Richard de Bovyndon, 1341-1352.

Nicholas Redhod, 1352-1353.

John de Kyrkeby, paid 10*l.* at his entry in 1353, and mentioned in 1357.

Prioresses.

Dionisia or Alice de la Mare, was probably prioress at the end of the 14th century.

Lucy Botelere, 1430.

Isabella Benyngton, 1446-1464.

Elizabeth or Isabella Baroun, 1468, retired by reason of old age and infirmities in 1480.

Alice Wafer, 10 July, 1480-1487.

Christina Basset, 1487.

Margaret Vernon, 1515.

Elienora Barnarde, died 4th June, 1527.
