

## A Study of the Character of Abbat Thomas de la Mare.

*Culled from "Gesta Abbatum" (British Museum 2073. 28)*

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**T**HOMAS de la Mare, 30th, and one of the most of the many distinguished Abbats of St. Albans, was born about 1308. He died on September 15th, 1396 "in his 88th year" (*Gesta Abbatum* III, 422).

He is said by W. S. Gibson (*Priors of the Monastery of Tynemouth*, 1847, vol. II, 41) to be the second son of Sir John de la Mare, and Joanna, daughter of Sir John de la Harpsfield. Gibson supposes Sir John to be the same John who with other persons obtained licence in 34 Edw. I to assign various lands in Hertfordshire to the Abbey of St. Alban.

Little is known of the boyhood of Thomas except that he appears to have had what, for those days, was a good education and he grew up into a man with a strong character and a fine presence.

He applied at an early age to Abbat Hugh de Eversden, who died in 1326, to be admitted to St. Albans Abbey for his novitiate. He was however sent to the Priory of Wymondham for that purpose.

There seems to be some confusion as to his brothers. Gibson (vol. II, 43) states that "his paternal uncle had been bred" (brought up) "among the Canons regular at Missenden, of which Convent he became Abbat," and goes on to mention his brothers Richard and John, and his sister Dionysia. *Gesta* II, 373, refers to his brothers William, Richard and John, and his sister Dionisia; William was a Canon regular at Missigdene (Missenden) and for his great worth promoted to the Abbacy; Richard at Thetford (Norfolk) and John at St. Albans adopted the monastic habit, and Dionisia also assumed it at Pratum (the Pré), near St. Albans, as a nun.

Richard of Wallingford, who succeeded Hugh, sent for Thomas forthwith, gave him his benediction and appointed him to the office of steward of St. Albans

Abbey. After a year of efficient service he was made cellarer.

The date of his appointment to be Prior of Tynemouth is not exactly known, but Gibson infers with good grounds that it was not before 1341.

He there found great trouble and anxious moments. It is said that he spent three years of tribulation, three years of preaching the Word of God, and three years of building and effecting repairs. The first period involved the defence of the priory property from marauders, distinguished and otherwise, which he accomplished with great success. The second period embraced the restoration and development of the estates, the reform of the monks, and promotion of "the religious life" inside and a religious life outside. The third period was spent a good deal in beautifying the Priory, on which a large sum of money was expended during the nine years, estimated at £864 (Gibson, 47).

Abbat Richard died from shock on the Monday following a thunder storm, in which the cloister of St. Albans Abbey was set alight above his chamber on the eve of St. Andrew's day (29th November) 1334 (Page and Nicholson, *Guide to St. Albans Cathedral and Abbey Church*, 1911 ed., p. 69).

Michael of Mentmore succeeded him as Abbat, who succumbed on Easter Day 1349 (Gibson, 48) to the pestilence which was then raging, and also carried off the Prior and Sub-prior and more than forty of the monks.

Thomas Risburgh was chosen Prior and John Woderove Sub-prior by the survivors.

Prior Thomas was summoned from Tynemouth and came, notwithstanding the great risk of travelling such a distance during the plague, and his arrival was greeted with great rejoicing thereat.

Henry Stukely, Prior of Wymondham; John, Prior of Bynham; William, Prior of Beaulieu, and other brethren were present in the Chapel, where the election of the Abbat was to take place by way of compromise, "*per viam compromissi*," which means to say that certain of the Priors and brethren were appointed to conduct the election and the others agreed to abide by their decision.

Henry, Prior of Wymondham, was first asked to

retire, but signified his inability to undertake the office. Thereupon Thomas de la Mare was requested to retire and was unanimously elected Abbat.

He immediately set about his journey to Rome for benediction by the Pope. He is accompanied by William de Dersingham, who dies at Canterbury, and is buried there. He has, however, Henry de Stukely and several seculars to accompany him, but they all adopt secular habit and travel separately, the Abbat accompanied by a single clerk, lest they should attract too much attention in those disturbed and war-riven times.

On arrival the Pope, Clement VI, grants him benediction, but he has difficulties with the avaricious Cardinals who are out for "douceurs," but he is befriended by Cardinal Perigord, a great advocate, who advises him to good purpose. Nevertheless he had to spend a very large sum of money to satisfy the greed of Cardinals and officials, and the Papal Court. He obtains, however, some indulgences from that Court and, on his return, some subsidies are granted to him by the Abbey and its Priories or Cells. Perigord some years afterwards visits St. Albans Abbey and refuses all gifts from Abbat Thomas, except food and so on.

While in Rome Thomas became very ill, the Pope alarmed and showing solicitude for his recovery. He is forbidden to drink water but someone gave him putrid water which he drank and promptly recovered, which mercy he attributed to St. Alban.

On his return journey he is accompanied by a single Clerk, to hear on arrival that his death had been reported.

The Obedientiaries, or officials under Abbatal jurisdiction, resign their keys which are duly returned to them. He does homage to the King, Edward III, and receives his temporalities or "revenues proceeding from lands, tithe and the like."

It may be here noted (*Gesta*, III, 396) that when the Pope claimed to place his nominees in the monasteries under Abbat Thomas of exempt jurisdiction, a process which reduced the monasteries of Hungary, Spain and Provence to a desolate condition, they did not suffer that unfortunate fate.

The Abbat also resisted successfully the command to the Prior of Wymondham by Henry le Spenser,

Bishop of Norwich, to collect a subsidy granted by the clergy of the province of Canterbury to Richard II, in 1380, and he also accomplished the remission of payment of a sum of money and personal attendance at Rome, exacted from each new Abbat on his confirmation, for a payment of twenty marks per annum to the Roman See (*Gesta*, III, 398). But the agents he employed were untrustworthy, and caused him to expend large sums of money for the purpose.

The text (*Gesta*, II, 389) expatiates upon the honour shown to him by the King for the rest of his life, and he is afterwards made a member of the Privy Council.

The first fruits of Tynemouth Priory are claimed by the Pope as having been vacated by Prior Thomas, but a royal letter is cited warning the Papal Nuncio no longer to persist in exacting those first fruits.

The Abbat not only visited his Priories occasionally to see that the occupants lived the appropriate monastic life, but he was sometimes employed by the King to make official visits to royal Abbeys and Monasteries with a view to their reform.

On one of his visitations of the former category he deposes the Prior of Bynham and he finds it expedient only to receive homage from the homagers, or holders or tenants of land with the obligation to do the homage of a vassal to his landlord, of the Priory of Tynemouth, where he had been Prior, forbearing to exact it from the others "for prudential reasons," which appears to indicate a wise judgement on his part.

In the latter category he visits the monasteries of Eynsham, Abingdon, Battle, and Reading (*Gesta*, II, 405) and carries out reforms, removing abuses and implanting good manners.

He also punishes some of the rebellious monks of Reading and at Chester he removes the Abbat. From some monasteries monks are brought to St. Albans Abbey to be trained in monastic discipline at the Abbat's sole expense.

He shows his diplomatic wisdom, when he goes to Bury St. Edmunds at the King's request, as distinct from a visitation ordered by a General Chapter, by encouraging the Prior not to resign, and on various occasions he supports that monastery (*Gesta*, II, 407). In-

deed in one instance he maintains two rebellious monks from that monastery at St. Albans, at his own expense, and earns their gratitude.

King John of France, during his captivity after Poitiers (1356), was his guest and became his great friend, and it was to him that Abbat Thomas confided his desire to resign his abbacy when he was tired by his strenuous labours, a proposition which neither the King or Prince Edward would entertain, understanding full well the value of having a man of his ability and character at the head of St. Albans Abbey.

These characteristics enabled this Thomas, both as Prior of Tynemouth and as Abbat, to overcome the many difficulties which beset him and involved him in a great variety of lawsuits, some of them of portentous length, in defence of the property and rights of the Priory or Abbey. In the majority of cases he succeeded, indeed in only a comparatively few was he defeated.

Sir Charles Oman, in *The Great Revolt of 1381* (p. 92), refers to him as "a hard-handed and litigious priest much hated by his vassals." That appears to be a harsh and unjustifiable judgment of his character.

For the formation of what appears to be a more acceptable view of his real character reference may well be made to *History of the Abbey of St. Alban* by Rushbrook Williams (1917. pp. 165-187), a copy of which can be seen at St. Albans Public Library. Mr Williams (p. 166) describes him as "of strong character, of eminent ability, stern and just." His description of the events of "the Great Revolt" at St. Albans seems to be quite fair to the parties engaged, and his inference from those events is that the orderliness and restraint of the tenants there, at any rate in comparison with the excesses perpetrated elsewhere, constitute a striking testimony to the mildness and moderation of the Abbey's sway.

It is true that the people broke into the Abbey and compelled the Abbat to give up to them the court rolls and records of services, which they burnt. They forced him to grant them a charter on their own terms. They opened the Abbey prison, released the prisoners except one whom they hanged, and committed other excesses.

When, however, the news of the death of Wat Tyler, who had been pushed into the leadership of the revolt, was received the tables were turned. The Abbat offered them terms but "the townsmen, under the leadership of the fanatical Gryndecobbe . . ., definitely refused all compromise" (Williams, p. 177), so that when King Richard II came to mete out vengeance, fifteen townsmen were hanged including "the chief organiser of the St. Albans rising, William Grindcobbe; a man whose courageous bearing and evident disinterestedness might have moved a sentiment of pity and admiration in anyone but the monastic chronicler who has told his tale" (Oman, p. 97). The difference in the estimate of the chief organiser will be observed.

There was a horrible sequel to the executions. When the bodies had been buried the townsmen, who had removed them, were themselves compelled to replace them on the gibbet with their own hands, and there they remained for fifteen months, but it must be remembered that the King had taken charge of the proceedings, that the Abbat's offer of terms had been refused, and that the painful episode of the gibbet was only closed by licence, at the supplication of Queen Anne, Queen of Richard II, for the bailiff and constable of St. Albans and any others who may wish to do so, to bury the bones of all persons put to death there on account of the insurrection (Westminster, September 3rd, 1382. *Calendar of Patent Rolls* at the Public Record Office, p. 168). Let it not be forgotten that the order for the replacement of the bodies on the gibbet was made by the King (*Gesta*, III, p. 354), and that through the preceding episodes it is frequently remarked that the intercession of the Abbat is invoked, and granted on behalf the St. Albans people more than once (*Gesta*, III, 333 and pp. before and after).

While at Tynemouth, Abbat Thomas recovers the manor of Hawkeslowe from Sir Gerard de Wythrington, who had attempted to kill him, but when at the ultimate trial the truth of the Prior's cause had been thoroughly enquired into Thomas Colvill, a knight whose doughty deeds in France had earned him a great reputation, rose up and declared his readiness to fight in the cause of

the Prior (Gibson, II, p. 46). This settled the just case in the Abbat's favour.

When Abbat, his tenant John de Chilterne farms certain tenements but omits to pay the rent, and fifty of his animals are seized by way of distress. The Abbat, advised by counsel, suffers them to starve, which to us sounds heartless on both sides, but in those days there was no such idea as that of a Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. After a temporary peace the Abbat prosecutes Chilterne on his bond and he is outlawed, retiring to Calais and Picardy. After a long time he returns but is imprisoned, but the Abbat offers him terms. The King, however, on his great promises liberates him. The Abbat then sues him on another bond, when he asserts that the Abbat is dead. The Abbat, though infirm, appears before the Justices of the Lord the King in Common Bench ("Banco"—*Gesta* III, 8) at Westminster, now known as the Court of Common Pleas, to prove the contrary. Chiltern is condemned to pay the sum and committed to the Fleet prison where he institutes a suit against the Abbat. The record of further proceedings in the same case in Exchequer, A.D. 1383-90 (*Gesta*, III, pp. 27-35), are followed by numerous cases beginning with one of an unjust distress upon the Abbat for the King's fifteenths, A.D. 1354, all of which are decided in his favour.

It is, however, with some relief that we can turn to his intensely human, just, firm and wise administration of the Abbey in Church, household, and literature. In the first, by way of illustration, he changed and improved the order of some of the services and psalms and of the singing, and it is said that he preferred to hear his brethren sing more than any others. He contributed service-books, vestments, pictures (*Gesta*, III, p. 381) and many articles of church furniture and other appurtenances. He repaired Richard of Wallingford's great clock (*Gesta*, III, p. 385), and adorned the shrine of St. Alban (*ib.*, p. 384). In "household" he rebuilds the great gate and part of the wall, repairs the King's hall, builds the new chamber, the tower of the water gate, and the Abbat's kitchen. He partitions the Abbat's chamber for his chaplains to sleep in. He paints, improves and furnishes the Abbat's chapel. He buys marble for

the tombs of Abbat Michael and himself. In literature he builds the writing-room under the inspection of the historian, Thomas de Walsingham, and encourages the copying of a large quantity of MSS. as well as the compilation of the Chronicles by and under the control of Walsingham. Throughout the abbacy of Thomas there was a continuous stream of more or less historical records made.

His hospitality was profuse, but his own abstinence great. In spite of that his conduct at his table to his guests was most hearty (*Gesta*, III, p. 402).

The pages following expatiate on his singular kindness and attentions to the sick, the leprous, and the dying, his humility and patience, his disinterestedness and kindness to others, his recourse to prayer, almsgiving, and abstinence in times of public adversity (*ib.* pp. 405-408).

His organisation is recorded of solemn processions, on such occasions, to the convents of Sopwell, the Pré, chapel of St. Mary Magdalene, St. Germain, and the churches of the town of St. Alban, carrying the shrine of St. Alban, with bare feet, with clergy and people, with his own community singing the psalms selected by him, (*e.g.*, xx, lxvii, cxxiii), also his general merits and his great learning and acquaintance with the Scriptures (*ib.*, p. 409). His writing was rapid but unsightly, nevertheless highly valued, his dress homely, and his eye upon his household watchful.

He did much for the accommodation at Gloucester College, Oxford, where the scholars from St. Albans Abbey were educated and attained great celebrity (*Gesta*, III, pp. 391 and 410).

Then the writer (*ib.*, p. 415) naively but charmingly proceeds to say that his object is to obviate the aspersions of the envious, but it is only proper now to turn to the negligences of this Abbat—his credulity and precipitateness; his employment of unworthy officers; the loss of several rents, rights and possessions attributed to Abbat Thomas; loss of annual gift of deer; destruction of the Abbat's infirmary; the manor houses of Bradeway and Tytenhangre allowed to go to ruin; the wall of the graveyard allowed to be destroyed; his great outlay when presiding over meeting of the Order; his rash

but beneficial changes in the services at Easter and Whitsuntide. He subtracts from the Almoner's revenues (*ib.*, p. 419), but (see p. 392) refuses to divert the funds of the Almoner from their original purpose, the relief of the poor, and the funds belonging to the office of almoner increase under his auspices.

It seems that the author has been somewhat put to it to find weights in the scale against the Abbat's virtues, but it all goes to show his great humanity. For his excessive zeal he is held in veneration by all, in fear by many.

Surely his character is truly summed up (*Gesta* II, p. 403) when Abbat Thomas is President of the General Chapter of the Benedictine monks, A.D. 1351, and publishes constitutions on the discipline of the Order. The monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, refuse to attend the General Chapter and his messenger is imprisoned by the Prior's servants. Edward, Prince of Wales, rebukes the Prior for the disrespect thus shown to Abbat Thomas as President of the Chapter, and the Prior makes payment to the Abbat and his servant by way of amends. The Prior and convent of Christ Church then send two proctors to the General Chapter. John, Duke of Lancaster, intercedes at the Chapter for the monks of Canterbury and joins the fraternity. The monks of Canterbury afterwards obtain the privilege of exemption from attendance at the General Chapter of the Order.

During his last two years he experienced great debility and suffering, but in spite of his agonies he kept up his participation in divine service, and his monks rendered assiduous attention to him up to his death on September 15th, 1396, aged 87 years.

As usually happens in such cases his aspect after death became pleasing and sweet, and he lay in state in full canonicals until the Office of the Dead was celebrated. He was buried in the Church, the funeral service being performed by the Prior.

The account concludes with—

“LOVE SHOWN BY ALL FOR THE MEMORY OF THE  
DEPARTED ABBAT.”