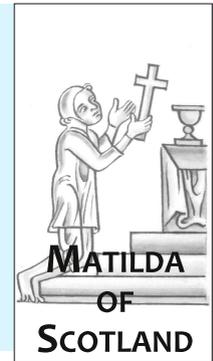




Merton Priory

TEACHER'S PACK No.8

LESSON IDEAS



This topic covers several elements in the KS2 and KS3 History National Curriculum:

KS2: significant individuals and events in British history;

KS3: religion in mediaeval life; society, economy and culture.

The NC talks of "the struggle between Church and crown", but Matilda challenges this, and we should ask whether it's better to talk of "the relationship between Church and crown".

Matilda's connection to Merton is slightly tangential, but her story does not appear in any school text books and so needs to be told - not least because it was often women, rather than men, who founded monasteries and directed the spiritual life of the countries of Europe. Matilda was called 'bona regina', the 'Good Queen'; she may be the 'fair lady' in *London Bridge is falling down*. Matilda is almost certainly the biggest single influence in establishing the popularity of the Augustinian order in England.

Matilda (c.1018-1118) was the daughter of Malcolm III of Scotland and Margaret of Wessex, sister of Edgar Ætheling. Because of her Anglo-Saxon descent, Matilda was actually called Edith; she changed her name to the more Norman Matilda at her coronation. As young children, Matilda and her sister were sent to Romsey Abbey (Hampshire) to be educated; their aunt was Abbess there. Matilda continued her studies at Wilton Abbey (Wiltshire). She rejected several suitors, but was betrothed by her parents to an English nobleman. In 1093, her father was killed in a skirmish with the English, and her mother died shortly afterwards. Her prospects unsure, the nobleman abandoned her (to her relief). We don't know what she did between 1093 and 1100, but in 1100 Henry I succeeded his brother to the throne of England, and one of his first acts was to marry Matilda. This seems to have been a genuine love match, although Matilda did come from Anglo-Saxon royalty, and was therefore useful in uniting Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, and thus giving Henry I more legitimacy (much as Elizabeth of York did to Henry VII centuries later). Their daughter, named after her mother, would become the Empress Matilda; their son William died when the White Ship sank.

Matilda accompanied Henry around England and Normandy, and led his council (curia) and acted as regent when he was away. She was close to Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, and she was a key player in the investiture controversy (too complicated for KS3 history). Highly literate and musical, she was perhaps the leader of taste in England during the period. She founded two hospitals for lepers, and the priory of Holy Trinity Aldgate; she funded the first arched bridge in England (Stratford-le-Bow) and public lavatories at Queenhithe.

Holy Trinity Aldgate was an Augustinian priory. Matilda was particularly attached to the Augustinians (she had been brought up, after all, on the writings of Augustine). She was a close friend to Gilbert the Norman, becoming a surrogate mother after his own died. It is no coincidence, therefore, that his foundation at Merton should be Augustinian; it was her influence that led Gilbert to give the manor of Merton to the Priory. Matilda often visited Merton to see how things were going, bringing her son William to play in the grounds, and both her and William's deaths were deeply felt by the Priory.

Matilda was the founding mother of the Augustinian order in England. A project could look at how she shaped religion. If you are doing a project on reconstructing Merton Priory, look at her foundation of Waltham Abbey, which was probably quite similar in style. It's also interesting looking at why no-one's heard of Matilda, given that she was so important, and that Henry valued her enough to leave the kingdom in her care.