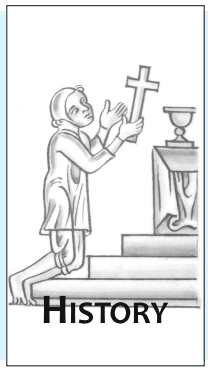
Merton Priory

Teacher's Information Pack No.2



Henry I granted Gilbert the Norman, Sheriff of Surrey, the manor of Merton, and Gilbert in 1114 founded an Augustinian (Austin) priory there. After a request from Prior Robert, and encouraged by Queen Matilda, Gilbert moved the Priory to the current site a couple of years later, in 1117: next to the river Wandle, it was ideal (as a contemporary description says) for milling, fishing and growing things. The first priory was built out of wood; a stone priory was built between about 1130 and 1175.

Famous mediaeval Mertonians include Thomas Becket, who was a pupil at the Priory in the 1120s, and Walter de Merton, who worked there a century later. Thomas became Archbishop of Canterbury; Walter founded Merton College - Oxford's first college. Another Oxford man and Archbishop of Canterbury (1233-40), St Edmund of Abingdon, went on retreat to the Priory in order to write his lectures.

In 1222, a storm blew the tower down, and the Priory had to be extensively rebuilt - this rebuilding took most of the century. A Lady chapel was added to the church in the early 14th century, but by the end of the century, the Priory church was in a state of disrepair, and various building repair schemes were put in place.

Although the Priory was of national importance throughout its 400-year history, the 13th century was its heyday. Thomas Becket had taken on the Merton canon's habit when he became archbishop, and in 1193 Archbishop Hubert Walter did the same - wanting to be like Becket, but also wanting to associate himself with Merton. In 1205, King John was using at least one of the canons as a nuncio (ambassador) in overseas business. In 1217, after Englan had dissolved into a civil war following Magna Carta, the final part of the peace-talks between John, his barons and the French Dauphin took place at Merton. Twenty years later, the barons were having problems with John's son, Henry III. He met his barons at a Parliament in the Priory, and there signed the Provisions (or Statute) of Merton - the first parliamentary statute - which codified barons' rights.

Henry III was a frequent visitor to the Priory, staying there over 50 times during his reign. In 1232, his chief justiciar also stayed there, but not in auspicious circumstances. Hubert de Burgh fell out with Henry III, and, fearing for his life, Hubert fled to the Priory to seek sanctuary. Henry ordered the citizens of London to take him, and around 20,000 turned up at the Priory gates, fully-armed - while Hubert prostrated himself at the high altar. Luckily for Merton, the King changed his mind and called off the London mob; unluckily for Hubert, Henry captured him after he left the Priory, and threw him in gaol in Devizes.

Edward III held his royal sports here at Epiphany in the late 1340s - a sort-of fancy-dress Olympics. Henry VI, already crowned King of England and France, had a further crowning ceremony at Merton in 1437, where he invested the Lancaster King of Arms.

In 1538, Merton Priory was dissolved, its treasure taken by the crown, and its canons dispersed. The building itself was dismantled and largely used to build the new royal palace of Nonsuch in Surrey (this was itself dismantled in the 1680s, to pay for the gambling debts of Charles II's mistress). Some stones make up buildings in the vicinity - it's thought that the Colour House Theatre may be a recycling of Merton Priory - and the archway to the parish church is also from Merton Priory.

The Priory was partly excavated in the 1920s and 1960s; the Chapter House in the 1970s. As part of the Sainsbury's building programme, the Museum of London carried out a full excavation between 1986 and 1990, and it holds many of the finds, including canons' skeletons.

Merton myth-busting: *Please note: since the video Merton Priory: History Unearthed was made, we discovered that King John did not, in fact, visit Merton on his way to Runnymede. You might see in history books and websites that Nicholas Brakespear, who became Pope Adrian IV, was educated at Merton. That's also wrong - one particular historians' misreading of a contemporary letter, which everyone then quoted!*

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1114	Gilbert the Norman founds Merton Priory at the site of St Mary's Merton
1117	The Priory moves to its present site
1121	Henry I grants a charter confirming the gift of the manor of Merton to Merton Priory
1120s	Wooden buildings begin to be replaced with stone ones. Merton canons found 7 further priories across the kingdom
c.1130	Thomas Becket studies as a boy at Merton Priory
1156	Thomas Becket as Chancellor persuades Henry II to fund Merton Priory's new nave
1161	Archbishop Thomas Becket takes up the habit of a Merton canon
1193	Hubert Walter takes up the habit of a Merton canon on his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury
1213	St Edmund of Abingdon probably writes the *Speculum Religiosorum* here
1214	Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, stays at Merton
1216	Fire destroys some of the Priory precinct buildings
1217	Louis, Prince of France does penance at Merton, following the peace accord with England
1222	The Priory church tower is blown down, causing major rebuilding
1232	Hubert de Burgh seeks sanctuary
1235	Parliament convenes at Merton; the Statute of Merton is passed
1236	Henry III stays at Merton with his new queen, Eleanor of Provence, after their marriage and her coronation. The Statute (Provisions) of Merton is agreed in the Chapter House
1258	Henry III pays for repairs to his private quarters at the Priory
1264	Walter de Merton establishes a house of scholars at Malden. This becomes Merton College
1310	Having lent the King money, the Priory is 'oppressed with poverty'
1320s	The Presbytery and Lady Chapel are rebuilt
1347	Edward III holds royal sports here
1349	The Black Death reaches England
1360s	Two priors die of plague
1376	Bishop William of Wykeham seeks sanctuary
1407	Privy council of Henry IV is held in the Chapter House
1437	Henry VI holds a crowning ceremony and invests Lancaster King of Arms
1538	Merton Priory is dissolved and demolished

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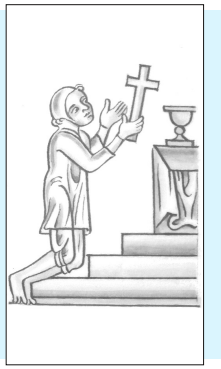
Information

Why Has No-One Heard of Merton Priory?

I. Why They Should Have



Merton Priory was one of the richest and most important convents* in the kingdom; however, it really only appears as a footnote in history books. On this page are some of the reasons why Merton was so important, and some of the reasons why it is an unsung part of English history. This topic could include the biographical topics of Hubert, Thomas and Matilda (see other pack pages). It focuses on the narratives of history, significance, and the problem of evidence.

Royal Connections

- Merton Priory was founded by Gilbert the Norman, encouraged by Queen Matilda.
- Although not founded by a royal, Merton Priory was treated as a royal foundation
- Henry III stayed so often that he was given his own quarters in Merton Priory.
- Edward I and Eleanor were staying at Merton Priory in 1274 when their son Henry died.
- Edward III held his royal sports at MP, 1347.

Education

c.1130 Thomas Becket is educated at Merton Priory
1213-4 Edmund of Abingdon writes his Oxford lectures at Merton Priory
1261 collaborating with Merton Priory, Walter de Merton sets up a college - this becomes Merton College, Oxford.

Religious Life

Various Merton canons became religious leaders elsewhere - for example, Henry of Merton became Prior of Carlisle, 1214. In 1193, Hubert Walter, Archbishop of Canterbury and Justiciar, became an honorary member of Merton Priory, wearing its habit.

Merton Priory sent its canons to found other priories (sometimes called daughter houses).

Political Hub

1205: King John sends a canon of Merton Priory as an ambassador to Normandy
1213: Stephen Langton stays on his return from exile
1215: King John leaves his valuables at Merton Priory for safe-keeping.
1217: Merton Priory hosts peace conference between England and France (presided by Cardinal Guala)
1232: Hubert de Burgh seeks sanctuary
1236: Parliament held at Merton Priory - passed Statute of Merton
1258: Convocation (meeting of all important churchmen) held at Merton Priory
1264, 1295, 1299: Prior summoned to Parliament
1274: Prior Gilbert attends Council of Lyons
1327: Queen Isabella looks to Merton Priory for support in overthrowing Edward II
1437: Henry VI has a coronation ceremony at Merton Priory
That Merton Priory was such a political hub is attested not just by the events that took place there, nor by the inclusion of the Prior in the important men of the realm, but also by the resignation of a couple of Priors, who wanted a quiet, more monastic life!

Moneybags!

Merton Priory was used as a bank by various kings - depositing valuables for safe-keeping, but also extracting huge loans from the Priory. In 1285, Edward I took out a loan of £500; in 1310, Edward II secured victuals and money for war with the Scots.

** a convent was a collection of religious people - male or female*

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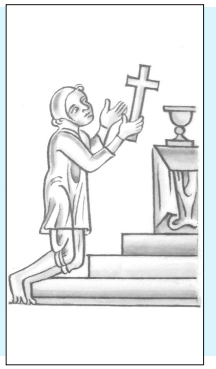
II. Why They Have Not



Nothing is Left

Merton Priory was razed to the ground in the 16th century. Its stones were reused mainly for one building, Nonsuch, but that was razed in the 17th century, and the stones taken elsewhere. The site was built on, and rebuilt on, and is now a supermarket.

Its memory is preserved in place names, but even they call it 'abbey', and not 'priory'.

Although there are some modern monasteries, there is nothing like the medieval monastery, which was so involved in everyone's lives: it is difficult to imagine the importance of Merton Priory to people around it. We could look at monasteries in the Far East to get an idea of their importance to society.

Say 'Merton' to any historian today, and they will immediately think not of the original Merton, our Merton, but of Merton College, Oxford. Merton Priory has been eclipsed by its offspring!

A couple of remnants from the Priory: above, the Colour House Theatre, recycled from Priory flint; below, the Priory gateway was rebuilt as the gate to St Mary's church

Evidence

Merton Priory hosted a number of important events, and looked after the King's business and money. But while some canons went abroad (outside the Priory) on royal or church business, it was normal for canons to stay within the priory precinct and the local community. History was decided at Merton Priory, but it was not decided by Merton canons, like it was by politician bishops - the canons were just the hosts. Even though there is evidence that these canons had good personal relationships with kings, queens and important men, because those were personal relationships, they were not written down. No doubt when Henry III was in residence at the Priory, he sought counsel from the Prior - but we have no written evidence of what might have been said. History remembers politicians, not civil servants!

The canons also worked as a community, rather than as individuals, and so, although we know the names of priors and cellarers, many canons who did significant things remain anonymous - that's just the nature of conventual life.

Medieval history has a problem of evidence: there were no newspapers, nor regular governmental or parliamentary reports. There were chronicles (including the Annals of Merton), and charters and statutes and so on; there were also lots of court cases. So in many cases, historians have to infer information - to make educated guesses from oblique evidence. For example, from those resignations of priors who wanted contemplative lives, we can infer that Merton was constantly busy with royal, and other, business.