

The Life of Gilbert the Sheriff, founder of Merton Priory (died 1125).

The Life was written sometime between 1150 and 1167.

'you would find Gilbert and the lord prior marking out the space in which to build the church; deciding whether it was possible to lead the water from the old channel to another place; showing where the mill should be moved to and fishponds made... A wooden chapel was built...'

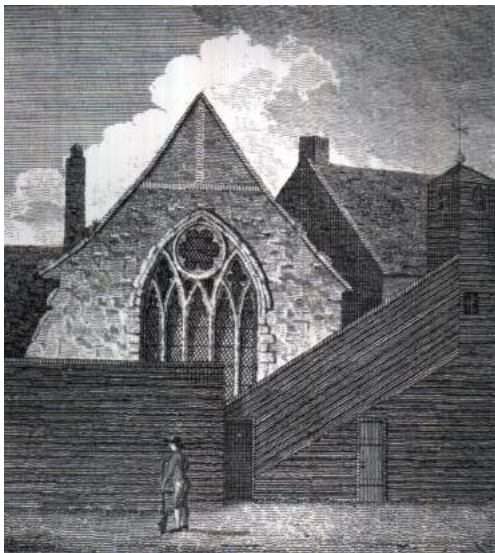
'In March in the year of his death [1125], Gilbert began the church in that place, a most splendid, beautiful and mighty work. After Gilbert's death this work was destroyed because some people felt it too great an undertaking. A part of the front remains...'

The Acts of the Archbishops of Canterbury written by Gervase the Monk (c.1200), for the year 1136.

'Willielmus archiepiscopus interea decidit in lectum infirmitate gravatus...'

'William the Archbishop was meanwhile ill in bed, and he sent two bishops, John of Rochester and Bernard of St Asaph, to induct the canons in their new church.'

(*'induct'* means to lead in - that is, to open the church formally. 'Church' here can mean the cloister and chapter house as well as the actual church.)



1225: The King ordered six oaks from the royal forest of Windsor to be given to Merton.

1227: The King ordered Hugh the royal forester to send Merton ten oaks from the royal forest of Galtres (Yorkshire)

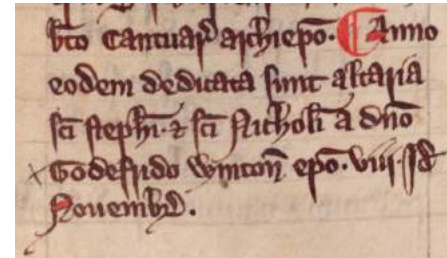
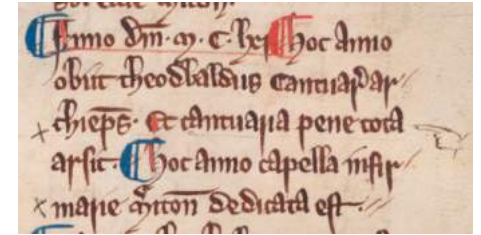
A chapel was built in the reign of Henry III. This picture is from the 1700s and may show that chapel. For where it was, see Merton Priory archaeological plans.

The Annals of Merton

This chronicle was written at Merton in the 13th century. It's now in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and you can see the whole thing on-line: <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/xj416cto118>.

Anno domini MCLXI (1161)

In this year died Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. And the whole of Canterbury was burnt down. Also in this year the infirmary chapel of Merton was dedicated.



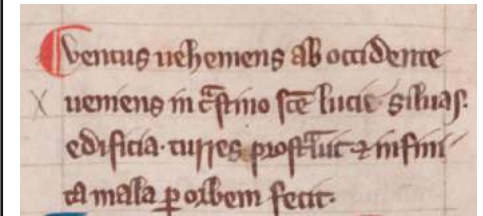
1194

In the same year were dedicated the altars of St Stephen and St Nicholas by lord Godfrey, Bishop of Winchester, viii Ides November [6th November].

(In addition, the altars to St John the Baptist and to the Holy Cross were dedicated in 1174 and 1196. This means that the church must have been pretty complete by then and that it probably had transepts.)

1222

A huge gale from the west blew on the feast of St Lucy [13th December]. The building lost its towers and infinite other bad things happened throughout the world.



Another priory's annals, the **Annals of Dunstable**, said that:

And in the month of December, two towers on the front of the church of Dunstable fell down. The same day, the tower at Merton fell down, and many buildings throughout England.

Memo from Henry III: It is decreed that Master John the King's Mason repair the chimneys in the King's chamber at the priory of Merton, his garderobe [dressing room], his chancellor's chamber, and to make all other repairs as necessary. At Westminster, December 1257.

Grant to Amicus, 26th October 1216: Be it known to everyone that we all agree and confirm this grant to Amicus, nephew of the Archdeacon of Surrey. We confirm to Amicus the garden in our precinct of Merton, in which he built houses, which were consumed by fire, and where he afterwards rebuilt a house.

By order of the Chapter, 26th January 1286: Dionysius Thurrock, chaplain, to be given a plot 4 rods by 4 1/2 (343 m²) between the sacristy and the house of chaplains, bounded by ditches. He can build a house there.

(Quite a few 'corrodians' lived in the Priory precinct. They could be clerks (vicars) waiting for a parish to go to, or they could be lay people retiring there: giving their money to the Priory in return for food and care – a bit like a luxury retirement home.)



Bishop William Wykeham to the Prior: I allow the religious men of Merton Priory the faculty to consecrate or dedicate three altars in the monastery church and two altar tops. At Esher, June 9th, 1382.

Bishop William Wykeham to the Prior: in your Priory and Church, and in some dwellings, walls and enclosures of your church, are portions extremely in need of repair; we order them all to be made good within six months. September 27th, 1387.



The Prior to the Bishop: May your grace know that the Chapel of the Blessed Mary in our Church of Merton is about to fall down; the masons and carpenters say it will cost 240 marks. The nave of our Church is also ruinous and will cost, according to the masons and carpenters, 2,000 marks. April, 1393

2,240 is about £1,100,000 in today's money. In 1380, you could buy 1,456 horses or 92,500 days (over 200 years!) of your carpenter's time. Source: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#>

WHAT DID MERTON PRIORY LOOK LIKE?

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Are there any descriptions of Merton Priory from when it existed? The answer is, sort of. No one sat down and wrote an essay about it. But bits are mentioned in various documents. We can use various books and manuscripts that were written at the time to piece things together:

- **chronicles:** manuscripts recording what happened in each year or over a period of time
- **biographies:** medieval historians call these 'vitae' ('vita' is 'life' in Latin)
- **cartularies** – collections of legal documents and random stuff
- **charters** – grants of land and other gifts, by the king or other people
- **letters**

In this collection is all the documentary stuff that professional historians use to work out what the Priory looked like. As you'll see, it's not much!



When you use any historical source, ALWAYS ask

- Who wrote it?
- When?
- Why?
- What does it tell us?
- What does it not tell us?

First, an example:

The Merton Cartulary, 14th January 1486: John Gisbourne was elected Prior. Most brethren were there in person, but brother Henry London, unable from age and debility to leave the infirmary, was represented instead by brother William Balle, Henry being in the small room in the bottom of the infirmary. John Gisbourne, being elected, was fetched from the upper room near the dormitory, which he as cellarer had long occupied.

This tells us that in 1486 there was an infirmary, and it was probably a two-storey building, with the main bit on the first floor, and a few rooms on the ground floor, one of which Henry London lived in. It also tells us that there was a dormitory, and that this was on the first floor and that there were other rooms next to it. Also, by this time, the cellarer had his own room. It doesn't tell us about the rest of the Priory or any other time.