

---

## ACCOUNT OF THE NUNNERY OF LITTLE MARLOW.

BY WALTER DE GRAY BIRCH, ESQ.

The Benedictine Nunnery of Little Marlow, originally styled "*De Fontibus de Merlawe*," and at a later period Minchin Marlow, presents to the antiquarian very few, and to the archæologist, it may be said, no traces of its former state of unambitious yet flourishing retirement. It was situated close to the river Thames, in the parish of Little Marlow, where the watercourse forms a bend to the north, upon a low-lying piece of ground now comprised, as the map indicates, between Spade Oak Wharf, Coares End, and Well End, which latter place seems to keep alive the remembrance of the ancient title of the Nunnery "*De Fontibus*," but no remains of any conventual edifice are understood to exist at the present day, to point out the exact locality of this quiet and peaceful retreat of holy women from the troublous times in which they had the sole alternative of living.

The conjectures of Leland, Tanner, Langley, and Dugdale, vary considerably in their attempts to establish the actual date of the foundation of the house. Unfortunately

no register, chartulary, or account-book of the nunnery has as yet been found to throw any light upon this period of its history, and its importance does not seem to have been sufficiently great to deserve a full mention in the Taxation of Pope Nicholas IV. in 1291, although we know positively that it was in being fully fifty years previous to that date : inasmuch as in its best days it sheltered but five or six nuns at a time, the probability is that very little business of a public or external nature was transacted with it, nevertheless, as it is first known to have been in regular order and capable of acquiring lands in the time of King John, there is every reason to believe and suppose that it was founded in the twelfth century, and possibly Langley is right in ascribing the date of its foundation to the reign of Henry II. Whether it owed its being to the labour and devoted self-sacrifice of a recluse, or sprang at once into comparative affluence by the generosity of a rich and noble patron, or was a branch of some larger nunnery, are points that cannot be solved with the scanty records that we as yet possess regarding this religious house. Like the generality of these establishments in England, this one was governed according to the rules of the Benedictine Order. I need not remind my hearers that this order of religious was instituted by St. Benedict about the year 516, and was received both abroad and in Britain with the greatest favour and attended with the most marked success, more than four-fifths of the entire number of houses for the reception of monks and nuns being regulated by the ordinances originally promulgated by the saint and modified to suit national requirements. It would be unnecessary here to point out the different reasons that may be assigned for the strong hold these simple yet decisive rules of solitude and self-denial gained over the impetuous disposition of the natives of our islands. The liberal spirit in which they were framed entered, without doubt, largely into the success they achieved, and accounts in no slight degree for the universal popularity of the Benedictines and their manner of life ; especially at a time when the sole choice for the ardent spirits of the better-born lay between the battle-field of blood, the intrigues of court life, and the quiet retirement of the church or the cloister. Many converts, including those of the highest rank, renouncing all interest and position in the State, gladly

accepted in exchange the privilege of joining the heaven-inspired bands of men and women, whose influence for the better over the mental condition of their countrymen, at a time when all beyond their walls was bloodshed, rapine, or lawlessness, was far greater than that exercised by any other class of society. From this nunnery, and other such places, proceeded in the early mediæval times not only all that there was of religion, not only the hymn of praise and the prayer of thanksgiving, but all that there was of the arts and sciences, medicine, surgery, agriculture, and manufacture, to exercise the softening influence of gradual civilization upon a people that had only just learned to forget its barbarism.

This nunnery was dedicated, like many hundred others, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and as late as 1718 contained a painting of its patroness; when the place was demolished, this may have been removed to a place of safety, but has not yet been heard of, possibly it may be discovered in some obscure corner not far from the seat of its former devotion. Taking notice of the recorded events which bear upon the history of the nunnery in order of chronology, I find that the antiquary Leland has stated, without any apparent authority, that a certain Geoffrey, Lord Spencer, was the first founder, but the name of this peer does not occur in the text-books, and is probably an error of that writer; at any rate, it cannot be accepted without some corroboration. Among the earlier notices of the nunnery is that contained in the register of Missenden Abbey, in this county, comprising an agreement between a certain A——, prioress of Merlawe, and the Canons of Missenden. This charter is stated to be of the time of King John, and, as it has never before been given *in extenso*, I have ventured to insert it in a note, from the original manuscript in the British Museum.\*

---

\* MS. Harl. 3688, fol. 98, b.

*Quædam obligacio A—— priorissæ de Merlawe de iiij sol. reddendis Abbathie de Messenden.*

Sciant omnes tam presentes quam futuri quod ego A. priorissa de fontibus de Merlawe et ejusdem loci humilis conventus annuatim solvere tenemur iiij solidos argenti Canonicis de Messendene ad duos terminos anni, scilicet ad festum Beate Mariæ in Martio, et reliquam medietatem ad festum Sancti Michaelis, pro grava quæ appellatur *Ludeput* juxta

In the ninth year of Henry III., A.D. 1224-25, permission was granted by the King to the nuns to hold a fair at Ivingho, in this county; and in the eleventh year of the same monarch this grant was confirmed, and ten acres of assart land in Hemelhamsted added. In the fourteenth year of King Henry, A.D. 1229-30, a rent in Mareto, perhaps an error for Marelo, or Marlow, was the subject of an entry in the Close Rolls in their favour. In the year 1230, Agnes de Anvers, or Danvers, then Patroness of the nunnery, gave her assent to the election of Matilda de Anvers, in all probability a relative, as prioress. The name of Cecilia de Turville occurs as prioress two years later, A.D. 1232, and that of Admiranda in A.D. 1247.

About this period, Isabella, Countess of Hertford and Gloucester, in conjunction with Sir Ralph Danvers, appears to have exercised the patronage of the nunnery. We find an application being made to them in A.D. 1244, on occasion of a vacancy, to elect a prioress, and they probably assented to the election of Admiranda.

Richard de Clare, Earl of Gloucester and Hertford, gave his licence for the election of Eva, otherwise called Yava de Whitenis, upon the loss of Admiranda, by death or resignation.

The next prioress upon record is Felicia de Kennebel, who resigned office in A.D. 1265, and was succeeded on the 4th of the Kalends of April (29 March) by Gunnora.

Gunnora resigned, according to Cole, in favour of Agnes, who is stated by Langley to have been surnamed De London, and to have resigned in A.D. 1270, whereas Cole calls her Agnes de Wexham, and places her election on the Ides of November (13th), in A.D. 1273.

The succession of prioresses was continued by the election of Agnes de Cliveden, who resigned her position in the nunnery in A.D. 1299. In the year A.D. 1291, the

---

*fossatum terræ ecclesiæ de Hedesore, et acram terræ et dimidiam quæ jacent juxta terram ecclesiæ ejusdem villæ versus Wouburniam cum quodam angulo jacente juxta viam. Quod si ad predictos terminos vel infra xv dies proximo sequentes prefatum redditum jam dictis canonicis non reddiderimus, predicti canonici prefatam terram cum prefata grava, velut teneamentum suum in manu sua tenebunt. Testibus Henrico de Scaccario; Reginaldo de Hampdene; Radulpho de Wedone; Matheo Brand; Roberto de Burnham; Hugone filio Roberti; Nicholao Capellano; Wiodus; Thoma Pincerna, et aliis.*



Taxation of Pope Nicholas IV. took place, but from the apparently imperfect manner in which that survey was taken, the possessions of Little Marlow Nunnery were omitted from the record, with the exception of ten shillings for its temporalities in the parish of St. Peter, Wallingford, in Berkshire.

On the 17th of September, A.D. 1299, Juliana succeeded as prioress by the preferment of Ralph de Monthermer, son-in-law of King Edward I., and Earl of Gloucester, in conjunction with William Danvers. This prioress, like most of her predecessors, resigned office, and Roesia de Weston was elected on the fourth of the Ides of June (10th), A.D. 1305.

A break here intervenes, until the occurrence of Joanna de Stonore as prioress, in A.D. 1343, whose death in A.D. 1349 gave place to Margeria de Jeromide.

Continuing the series, we next meet the name of Susanna de Hampton, whose resignation was accepted in A.D. 1395. Willis mentions a second Roesia de Westone, elected in A.D. 1395, but it is more than probable that he fell into an error with regard to the date, confusing it with that of the first Roesia, who entered upon her duties in 1305. The next prioress noted in the records is Joanna, under the date A.D. 1403.

After another hiatus, Elizabeth Broke, prioress, resigned in A.D. 1474, making way for Isabella Savage, appointed on the 14th of August in the same year, by Thomas Rotherham, Bishop of Lincoln, in whose diocese Little Marlow then lay, the presentation having lapsed to him from the proper patrons.

Eleanora Kirby occurs on the 15th of October, A.D. 1492; and Eleanora Bernard in A.D. 1516. This lady resigned office here for the more influential position of Prioress of St. Mary de Pratis, near St. Albans. The last prioress, whose name remains, was Margeria, or Margareta Vernon. She occurs in the year A.D. 1530, and became Abbess of Mallington, in Kent, after the 26th of Henry VIII., A.D. 1534—1535, and probably not before the dissolution of her nunnery in A.D. 1537. An interesting letter, written by her to Thomas Cromwell, the King's Secretary, detailing the proceedings of the Visitors appointed to examine the Religious Houses, and offering to surrender, exists in the British Museum; and, as it has

hitherto escaped the notice of monastic historians, because she makes no direct mention of the name of her nunnery, I venture to insert it here, as throwing some light upon the history of the dissolution. Her willingness to resign the post she occupied at Little Marlow no doubt conduced, in a great measure, to her obtaining promotion to the then vacant dignity of Abbess in a much richer nunnery, that of Malling, in Kent; but even this she did not hold for long, as she surrendered with eleven nuns on the 29th of October, 30 Henry VIII., A.D. 1538, and obtained a yearly pension of £40 during her lifetime.

ORIGINAL Letter from the Prioress to Thomas Cromwell offering to surrender (MS. Cotton., Cleopatra E. iv., folio 71) :—

“To the Ryght onurabyll and hyr most specyall good mayster, mayster secretary vnto the Kynges most nobyll grace.

“After all dew commendacyons had vnto yowre good maystershyps with my most vnable thankes for the greate cost mayd on me and my pore madyn at my last beyng with yowre maystershyps, farthermore plesyth yt yow to vnderstonde that yowre vysytors hath bene here of late who hath dyscharged iij of my systers, the one is dame Katheryn the other ij is the yonge women that were last professyd whyche yt not a lyttyll to my dyscomforte, nevertheless I must be content with the Kynges plesure, but now as towchyng my nowne parte I most vmbly beseche yow to be so specyall good mayster vnto me yowre poore bedewoman as to geve me yowre beste advertysment and counseyle what waye shalbe best for me to take seyng there shalbe none left here but myselfe and thys pore madyn, and yf yt wyll please yowre goodnes to take thys pore howse Into yowre owne hondes other for yowre selfe or for my nowne m[ayster] yowre sounne, I woyld be glad with all my hart to geve yt Into yowre maystershypes hondes with that ye wyll commaunde me to do therin: Trustyng and nothyng dowptyng In yowre goodnes that ye wyll so provyd for vs that we shall have syche onest lyvyng that we shall not be dreven be necessity nether to begge nor to fall to

no other vnconvenyence, and thus I offer my selfe and all myne vnto yowre most hygh and prudent wysdom, as vnto him that ys my onely Refuge and comfort In thys world, besechyng god of hys goodnes to put In yow hys holy sprete that ye maye do all thynges to his lawde and glory,

“By yowre owne assured bedewoman,

“MARGARET VERNON.”

In 1537, the nunnery of Little Marlow was dissolved, and, in combination with several other small monasteries, transferred, as far as possessions went, by King Henry VIII., to the Abbey of Bisham or Bustlesham, in Berkshire, a few miles further up the river on the opposite bank. This abbey had just been refounded and endowed with ample possessions drawn chiefly from the religious houses in the vicinity. Willis, in his “History of Mitred Abbeys,” gives the following account of the Survey rendered by the Commissioners for the dissolution:—“That it was of the order of St. Benet. Clere value, £23 3s. 7d. per annum. Nunns two, both desyren capacitys. Servants two, women servants two, and one priest. Bells, lead, etc., worth by estimation, £4 10s. 8d. The house in good estate. The value of the goods, £17 0s. 2d. Debts, none. Woods, eight acres, six above twenty years’ growth.”

The following is an abstract of a very interesting document, showing the locality of the different possessions of this body, being the Minister’s Account from the Roll of 28 Hen. VIII., A.D. 1537, in the Record Office:—

	£	s.	d.
Rents, etc., in Little Marlow . . .	9	16	3
„ „ Great Marlow . . .	2	12	0
„ „ Hambledon . . .	1	7	4
„ „ Beckensfeld . . .	0	7	2
„ „ Cabroke . . .	1	19	8
„ „ Taplowe . . .	1	7	2
„ „ Wycombe and Penne . . .	1	9	0
„ „ Wendover and Weston- Turnville . . . }	2	8	2
„ „ Benfeld (co. Berks) . . .	0	3	4
Dominical Lands, etc. . . . .	16	12	7
	<hr/>		
	£38	2	9

There is also extant in the First Fruits Office the Return of Valor Ecclesiasticus, made in 26 Hen. VIII., of which the following is an abstract:—

Temporalities of the Nunnery :—				£	s.	d.
In Little Marlow	.	.	.	7	6	10½
Great Marlow	.	.	.	2	11	4
Hamulden.	.	.	.	1	6	8
Hogeley and Stoke	.	.	.	1	6	8
Beconfeld	.	.	.	0	7	2½
Wooburne* and Hedsore	.	.	.	0	12	8
Burnehame and Taplowe	.	.	.	2	18	4
Wycombe and Penne	.	.	.	1	15	1
Wendover and Weston- Turvyle	.	.	}	3	2	5
Dominical Lands, etc.	.	.		.	4	1
Wood-sales, etc.	.	.	.	1	0	0
				£26	8	10
Spiritualities of the Nunnery :—						
Rectory of Little Marlow	.	.	.	10	0	0
Offerings in Colebrook Chapel	.	.	.	0	10	0
Proper tithes	.	.	.	0	8	1
				10	18	1
				26	8	10
				£37	6	11
The Outgoings were :—						
Rents, and Fees	.	.	.	6	12	4
Annuity to Bp. of London	.	.	.	1	0	0
Salary of a Chaplain for the Nuns	.	.	.	5	6	8
Archdeacon of Bucks	.	.	.	0	17	7¾
Alms for the soul of the King, the Founder	.	.	}	0	6	8
Gross outgoings	.	.		.	14	3
				23	3	7¼
				2	6	4½

\* Bought by Richard Langley, 21 Sept., 1592, and retained until lately in the family.

The new foundation of Bisham Abbey, with its great endowments, says Langley, was only a veil to conceal the king's real designs, and to allay the commotion which the rapid dissolution of religious houses occasioned. In two years' time, Bisham, following the fate of the other monasteries, surrendered, in the persons of Abbot Cowdrey and fifteen monks, and the site of Little Marlow Nunnery was granted to John Titley and Elizabeth Restwold, as appears by an original entry dated 19 November, 32 Hen. VIII., containing the king's grant to these persons of the "scite, etc., of the late monastery and priory of Minchen Marlowe." It would appear that a lease of the lands and other properties of the nunnery had been granted soon after the suppression on the 28th year of Hen. VIII. to Elizabeth Restwold. The indenture of lease is given at length in the King's Charter for the refoundation of Bisham, and in the body of the deed the names of the lands belonging to Little Marlow Nunnery are particularly set forth.

In the third and fourth years of Philip and Mary, A.D. 1556—1557, these lands were alienated to John Lord Williams of Thame, and Henry Norreys, Esq. None of the registers or official books belonging to the house are known to be in existence. This is more to be regretted, as the books, if available, would have afforded ample means of arriving at a more accurate knowledge of the affairs of the nunnery, and would have given, in addition, a variety of miscellaneous information, alike interesting to the historian, topographer, and genealogist. An impression of the common seal of this nunnery, appended to an original deed bearing date May 1st, 22 Hen. VII., that is, A.D. 1444, was formerly in the possession of John Caley, Esq., one of the editors of Dugdale's "*Monasticon Anglicanum*." It represented the Blessed Virgin Mary bearing in her lap the Infant Jesus, and sitting crowned and draped upon a throne between two slender pillars supporting an ornamental arch. In the *exergue*, in a niche, a half length figure of an ecclesiastic, adoring the Saint. The legend ran:—  
 . . . . CTE      MA . . . . . DE . . . . ., probably for *Sigillum Sanctæ Mariæ de Marlow*. Willis, the antiquarian, who visited the site in A.D. 1718, says that the "great part of this Convent is still standing, though in



ruins. The Tower stood at one corner, separate from the offices. The Church or Chapel was a small tiled building, ceiled at top. Against the east wall are still to be seen some paintings of the Virgin Mary ; on each side of her was a saint."

The Hall measured twenty yards long, by five yards wide ; and in the windows were three coats of arms : 1. Gules, a lion passant guardant, langued, or ; over all a band of the second, probably those of King John, as Earl of Gloucester. 2. Quarterly, first and fourth, argent, a bear salient, sable, muzzled, or ; *Bernard*, second and third, gules, three pikes in fesse, argent ; *Lucy*, or more probably *Lilling*, as is preserved in a pencil note of late date on the margin of the copy of "Langley's History," in the King's Library in the British Museum. Crest, on a wreath, a bear's head, coupé tenné, muzzled, or. 3. Azure, two wings conjoined, tenné, by a silk twist with tassels, over all a fesse. These arms probably belong to the family of *Cawoodley*, or *Cawodley*, of Devonshire, whose correct bearing is : Azure, two wings conjoined, argent, over all on a fesse, gules, three bezants.

The conventual hall was pulled down in A.D. 1740. Langley, writing in 1797, states that "there are at the present time scarcely any remains of the Convent." Part of the wall of the Tower was, however, yet standing, but the other ruins had been taken down, and a farm-house built with the old materials ; this may possibly be that now called the Abbey Farm.

In conclusion, the archæologist who is desirous of pursuing the subject of Little Marlow Nunnery from the early times of King John down almost to the present day will find Thomas Langley's "History of the Hundred of Desborough ;" Dugdale's "Monasticon," vol. iv. ; Tanner's "Notitia Monastica ;" Willis's "Mitred Abbies ;" the "Record" publications of the various Rolls and Charters of a public nature ; and the MS. catalogues in the British Museum, of great use and necessity in eliminating the history of the religious house which in this account has been told as briefly as possible.\*

---

\* An opportunity here presents itself of giving *in extenso*, a transcript of the account of Little Marlow, made by the Commissioners for collecting