

FAVERSHAM ABBEY RECONSIDERED

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AT the Dissolution Faversham Abbey held but a small community. Abbot John Caslock and eight monks surrendered their house to the King on 8th July, 1538. On 10th May, 1539 the King sent order for the church and cloister to be demolished and the stone removed from the site. On 16th May Sir Thomas Cheyney, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, purchased the Abbey site and other land. It follows that the work of demolition would be carried out under his direction.

Some Abbey buildings of no architectural distinction escaped demolition at this time and were turned to new uses. But one by one they were pulled down. And today nothing of the Abbey remains above ground but the building known as Arden's House. This is substantially the Abbey guesthouse, adjoining the outer gate which led to the town. As to the buildings demolished in 1539, no local tradition remained, either as to their site or size. When Thomas Southouse, living alongside the outer gate (then still standing), essayed to give a history of the Abbey in his *Monasticon Favershamiense* (1671), he could find nothing to tell him either the position or the architectural character of the quondam Abbey church. His book gives the impression that Faversham Abbey was of local interest but of no special distinction.

About 1840 a local antiquary, Edward Crow, writing his manuscript *Historical Gleanings*, recorded signs of monastic buildings in the Well and Setry orchards. He describes part of the underfloor of the church, without paving or foundation stones, as running eastwards from the stone wall which encloses the Setry orchard on the west. He thought that, at one point, the foot of this wall belonged to the foundations of the west front of the church. But he estimated that the church was only a 100 ft. long, and narrow in proportion. And in spite of the fact that part of a drain running from the Abbey to the Creek was uncovered, and proved to be built of stone, 5 ft. from floor to vault, Crow still retained the impression that Faversham Abbey had been of no great size. It was wholly unexpected, therefore, when, in January and February, 1965, the Reculver Excavation Group directed by Mr. Brian Philp found that Crow's 'underfloor' extended nearly four times as far to the east as Crow supposed. Their excavation quickly proved that the Abbey church had not been small but huge. And while the

Aneresham

133

Rex Angl Archiepiscopus et Episcopus Abbatibus Comitatibus
 Justiciis Vice Justiciis et omnibus fidelibus suis francis
 et anglis totius Anglie Salutem in domino sempiternam et remem-
 orationem pro salute anime mee et antecessorum meorum et
 et filii mei et aliorum posterorum meorum et antecessorum
 meorum Regni Anglie memoriam meam de honorificam
 ad fundandam Abbatiam unam ibidem de ordine monacho-
 rum Sancti marci in Quare volo et permittit proprio
 Abbas et monachi ibidem deo servientes impetum teneant
 et possideant manerium illud et Abbatiam suam ibidem
 bene et in pace et libere et quiete et honorifice in
 bosco et pluvio in pratis et pascuis et aquis et molendinis
 et Stagnis et portibus et omnibus alijs locis et rebus
 tunc Soreus et Sara et Tost et Dycam et in paragon
 tunc et tunc omnibus alijs liberis consuetudinibus tunc
 quibus aliqua ecclesia regni mei melius et liberius et
 equitius tenet Quibus etiam quod dedimus Ego et matilda
 Regina uxoris mee wille de supra in quibusdam et eodem manerio
 de honorificam habere tunc partem suam de hereditate
 Regine et sui plus in manerio meo de middeltone Th
 Episcopus Wintonie fratris mee et Roberto Episcopo Londini et Henrico
 filio meo et Henrico de supra et Henrico de B et Henrico de
 Henrico de Luri et Henrico de Essex et Henrico de Cornhill et
 Henrico de Wyke

FAVERSHAM ABBEY RECONSIDERED

Know ye further that I and Queen Matilda my wife have given to William of Ypres in exchange (*escambium*) for the said manor of Feversham, Lillechurch and its appurtenances (of the Queen's inheriting), and to complete the bargain, some land from my manor of Milton (Regis).

Witnessed at Bermondsey by Henry Bishop of Winchester my brother, by Robert Bishop of London, and by Count Eustace my son, in the presence of W of Ypres, R of B, W Martin, Richard de Lucy, Henry of Essex, and R de Cannill.

It is a misnomer to call this document, which is neither directed to the Abbot and Brethren of Faversham Abbey nor concerned to regulate their life, a foundation charter. It is royal letters-patent. Issued by the King in the presence of witnesses, it publishes to all and sundry the news that Stephen has founded Faversham Abbey, and it tells of the provision that he has made for its continuance.

Letters-patent are a form of publication. Copies were made and read in appropriate assemblies. There was opportunity for the King to open his mind to his people on wider issues than that which first occasioned their issue. Letters-patent on a particular theme may also disclose a policy. Where they concerned religion and the good of Holy Church, they would be read in churches, and everywhere reach the ears of the common people. Our document is of this kind.

It does more than secure the Abbot and Monks of Faversham Abbey in the enjoyment of what has been granted to them. It also expresses the King's desire for the unity of his people. *Franci* and *Angli* throughout the land are one nation under his rule. There follows a more subtle expression of the same thought. This foundation, Stephen says, is for the good of souls; first his own soul and the souls of his family. But his continental forbears are not mentioned. Their place is taken by Stephen's predecessors on the throne of England, *Angli* and *Franci*. He treats them as one succession because the kingdom is one. This Abbey will be the royal chantry of England. So it will be a symbol of the nation's unity.

It is perhaps an indication of the importance of this thought of national unity in the mind of Stephen and those around him that his brother Henry of Blois caused the remains of Saxon and Danish royal-ties lying in St. Grimbald's at Winchester to be brought across into his Norman cathedral. It is as though these men of Blois would say 'Forget the Conquest, and think only of the continuing life of England'.

Stephen's plans for Faversham Abbey were complex and must have called for long preparation. He wanted to staff his royal chantry with Cluniac monks. They above all others were schooled and disciplined in performance of the liturgy and divine offices. But every Cluniac monk was under obedience to the Abbot of Cluny. With the multipli-

cation of Cluniac houses, it was still the rule that every monk spent some time at the mother house. For the rest, they were moved as the superiors of the Order decided. If the royal chantry at Faversham were to be a daughter priory to the Cluniac Priory of Bermondsey, its personnel would not be permanent nor its head an Abbot. But Stephen wanted it to be a royal abbey and its brethren permanently his chaplains. It is wonderful that he was able to get his way in this. Stephen had to persuade Peter of Cluny to surrender a splinter group from his Order to staff his chantry. And Peter was persuaded. For Clarembald and twelve monks from Bermondsey left that cloister and Cluniac obedience, in 1147, to become Abbot and monks of Faversham Abbey. Stephen must have won Peter over to his view of the importance of the new foundation. And that pledged that it would be a grand foundation.

If the church followed a Cluniac pattern, that would have been a grand gesture for the King to make to the little band that, to forward his purpose, accepted perpetual exile from their spiritual home. For Cluny remained their spiritual home. When Clarembald swore monastic obedience to Archbishop Theobald in place of the obedience from which he had been released, he explained himself in words that emphasized the obedience to himself of his Faversham monks. That suggests that despite his changed canonical status he meant his company to hold fast to their Cluniac ideals. Light is thrown upon this subject by a document in Canterbury Cathedral library, connected with the emancipation of Clarembald and his convent from Cluniac obedience. It is a declaration addressed to Archbishop Theobald and to the company that will be gathered with him in his cathedral to witness Clarembald's profession of canonical obedience to the See of Canterbury. The writer is 'B. Prior of the convent of St. Mary of Charity' of the Cluniac order. He addresses himself also to the Bishop and clergy of Rochester, the Prior and monks of Christchurch, and to all clergy and laity present, testifying the absolute and final character of the emancipation as well from the Church of Cluny as from every subordinate Cluniac authority. To conclude, he equates Clarembald's emancipation with that enjoyed already by the Abbot of Reading. So there was precedent for granting Stephen's request.

In 'B's' eyes Reading and Faversham belong to the same singular category of royal foundations to which a special concession was in place. And since Reading was tremendous (length of church 450 feet, chapter-house frequently housing the English parliament) Faversham might be expected to be on the grand scale. But there the parallel ends. The Abbot of Reading owed no canonical obedience within the English realm. And whereas Henry I, founder of Reading, was at pains to explain his choice of place, Stephen offers no hint of his reason for choosing

FAVERSHAM ABBEY RECONSIDERED

Faversham. Yet the last part of our letters-patent puts it beyond doubt that the choice was deliberate.

So this foundation of Stephen's in 1147 was not just another English abbey, but something special. Then why at Faversham? The last part of our document puts it beyond question that the choice of Faversham was premeditated and deliberate. The *escambium* with William of Ypres must have taken some working out. And in relation to the Faversham of 1147 the choice of the actual site for the Abbey was a clever one. This part of the plan looks as if it was as well thought out as the other. But this time we can only guess at the reasons that guided the plan. They might, however, be connected with Stephen's involvement in the possibility of naval war. Faversham had strategic possibilities. It could be the forward headquarters for the defence of the English Channel coasts against naval attacks from the Continent.

It became exactly this in 1292. Faversham looks out over the Swale, at its east end a shallow piece of open sea in the lee of Sheppey. Here was anchorage for many little ships, and here Edward I mustered a fleet to assist him in his Scotch war. Eastwards there were no harbours on the north coast of Kent. Faversham was half-way from London to the Channel ports and was touched by Watling Street. So hither came Gilbert, Earl of Clare, the King's admiral. Guncelin, Earl of Badlesmere, lent Gilbert, it seems, his manor house in Selling for residence. So Gilbert was there for the last three years of his life, a fact commemorated still in the east window of Selling church which Princess Joan had placed there to Gilbert's memory. The house where they lived was probably Rhode Court, whence the Swale and its creeks were in view. The fleet that in 1293 swept the French off the Channel was probably marshalled off Faversham.

Evidently these doings suddenly raised the importance of Faversham, as the town was assessed for seven out of the fifty-seven ships of war to be provided by the Cinque Ports for the King's service. So to this day the borough seal carries the proud legend REGIS VT ARMA REGO LIBERA PORTVS EGO. And the device of the seal is a ship of war being manned, while she flies as admiral's flag the chevrons of Clare. Might this scene have been anticipated in the 1140's? There is no reason against. And if Stephen had placed his great royal chantry overlooking Faversham creek, it was there to house him, its chapter house for his councils of war, and the great nave in which to assemble his officers for briefing.

No sooner, however, was the Abbey built than the tide of events turned against Stephen. Matilda and Eustace predeceased him. He died at Dover in 1154 and was laid to rest in Faversham Abbey church, while the English throne passed to Henry Plantagenet. With that succession Stephen's royal chantry had lost its national significance.

FAVERSHAM ABBEY RECONSIDERED

And the grandeur of its minster could no more keep it an important institution than it could preserve its adhesion to Cluniac ideals.

Did the great minster, through the centuries, make its impression upon beholders? Nothing seems to survive to tell us, until the visit of John Leland to Faversham about 1530. He speaks of our Abbey as 'the great abbey of black monks'. It was not great in numbers. There were less than a dozen Brethren. It was not great in reputation. Leland found its manuscript library almost negligible. What drew from him the adjective 'great' can only have been the minster.

What is so astonishing is that the people of Faversham who lived through generations in the presence of this architectural landmark quickly lost all memory of the greatness that had been. When in 1965 the spade re-established that greatness, it came as a complete surprise. And for this reason it is time for a reconsideration of Faversham Abbey, of which a great part must be left, however, until after the completion of Mr. Philp's report upon the excavation.