

Abbess Ælflæda (circa 907 – ?)



Ælflæda, created by
Romsey Abbey Primary School

The first establishment of a religious house at Romsey was made by King Edward the Elder, the elder son and successor of Alfred the Great. Edward's reign lasted from 899 until his death on 17th July 924 and he is supposed to have founded Romsey Abbey in 907.

The Nunnery was, at this time, quite a small house, and similar to Saint Mary's, Winchester, which is described as "the little Monastery" (monasteriolium); it may indeed be doubted if the sisters lived in community under one roof. Very little is known about this establishment.

King Edward's elder daughter by Ælflæda, his first wife, was buried here at Romsey. Her name was also Ælflæda and she and her sister Æthelhilda both entered religious life, but the latter as a lay sister only. They are connected with the monastery at Wilton, near Salisbury, and whilst Æthelhilda was buried there, Ælflæda found a resting place at Romsey. Her Obit (a Requiem Mass for her soul) was commemorated at Saint Mary's, Winchester, on 6th March, and probably also at Romsey.

It has been said that she was Abbess of Romsey. This is, by no means, unlikely, because of her kinship with the Founder, and her burial there. Her half-sister, St. Edburga, lived and died a member of the sister establishment of Saint Mary's, Winchester, and of her it is recorded that she not only became Abbess, but that finally her name was joined with the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a Patron Saint of that House.

St. Edburga died in the year 925 (?); her Obit was kept on 15th June, and her Translation on the 18th July. Leland, quoting from an ancient writer, says "that Elflæda, Abbess of St. Mary's, re-covered the mortuary chest of St. Edburga with gold and silver." If the reference is to Romsey and to the daughter of Edward the Elder, it would go far to establish the

supposition that Ælflæda was an Abbess of Romsey.

These ladies, the daughters of Edward, and granddaughters of Alfred, were not unworthy of the stock from which they sprang, and seem to have repaid the great care spent upon them. It is recorded that Edward the Elder carried on the traditions of his father and caused his children to be very well educated. "In childhood, his daughters gave their whole attention to literature, and afterwards employed themselves in the labours of the distaff and needle."

There are vestments, including a stole, at Durham, which Athelstan, the son and successor of Edward, offered to the body of Saint Cuthbert. The stole is woven in gold wire, with self-edged openings for the insertion of figures of the prophets and letters in tapestry work. On it is inscribed the sentence 'Ælflæd fieri prtecepit pio episcopo Fridestana.' (Ælflæd caused it to be made for the pious bishop, Frithestan.) The two names inscribed show that this stole was

worked by the ladies of the Court at Winchester, 910-915, when Edward's daughters were being educated there. "Frithestan was Bishop of Winchester 909-931, and the Ælflæd, here spoken of, was the Queen of Edward the Elder, and mother of Ælflæda of Romsey. It may be that the young Princesses took part in making these very vestments, and in any case these specimens of Saxon work exhibit a glimpse of the refined and elevated surroundings amidst which the daughters of Edward were brought up.

Ælflæda must be carefully distinguished from a later Abbess and Saint, St. Æthelflæda, whose name was coupled with the Blessed Virgin Mary as a Patron Saint of Romsey Abbey.

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