

Abbess Cecilia (1238 – 1247)



Cecilia, created by Halterworth Primary School

The Records of Romsey during the reign of Henry III relate rather to external than to internal affairs, and deal with the appointment of officers, with grants from the Crown and Manor privileges. The Episcopal Registers, from which some idea might be obtained as to the internal life of the Convent and the character of the Abbesses, are not available until the close of the 13th century.

A slight sketch is alone possible, and this is the more to be regretted because the 13th century witnessed the close of the golden age of the monastic life, and it would have been of great interest to know how Romsey fared, and whether the Convent maintained that high excellence as an educational establishment, which was its proud possession in the time of Christina and her niece, the Princess Matilda.

When the 13th century opened, Matilda Patric was still Abbess, and during the fifty-six years of Henry III's reign there were, including this lady, eight Abbesses who ruled over Romsey Abbey. They followed in quick succession, Matilda Patric dying in 1218-19 was followed by an unnamed Matilda (1219-30), whose successor was Matilda de Barbfle (1230-37); then came Isabel de Nevill for about a year (1237-38), and she was succeeded by Cecilia (1238-47); the Prioress Constance was the next Abbess (1247-60), and after a vacancy of some six months, during which time William de Axemuth held the Abbey as the King's Escheator, Amicia de Sulhere, who had been Prioress, received the abbatial staff, 16th May - 6th June, 1261, and continued as ruler for some seven years, when Alicia Walerand was appointed, 11th - 28th July, 1268.

Little is known about the Abbesses between Matilda Patric and Alice Walerand. However, the story of the fortunate recovery of the name and date of Cecilia is worth telling, as it shows that perseverance in a search of this kind is always worthwhile, in spite of many disappointments.

In his 1906 publication *Records of Romsey Abbey*, Henry G D Liveing states that the name Cecilia came to light when he studied a 14th century MS. (B. M., Lansd. 442), which is a beautifully written book or register of deeds, relating in part to the Abbey's Wiltshire property. This register was made by the Monks of Edington, who in the 14th century succeeded to some of the property and entered into possession of the church there. In this collection there is a deed mentioning Cecilia, but without a date; there are, however, the names of a number of witnesses appended which proved that she was Abbess in the earlier half of the 13th century, but her exact place was still unknown. Further information came to light from an old and interesting deed relating to the Rector of Edington and the Rector of St. Laurence, or Parish Church of Romsey. There had been a long continued dispute about a tithe in Wiltshire, and John, the Rector of Edington, and Adam, the Rector of Romsey, together with the Abbess, petitioned the Bishop of Salisbury to step in and settle the matter. He did so, and the deed was sealed with the seals of the Bishop, Abbess,

Convent, and of the two Rectors, but best of all the date was added - 1241. This document did not, however, give the exact date of Cecilia's appointment, and whilst her predecessor and successor both occur in the Close Roll as having the King's confirmation, there is no mention of Abbess Cecilia. A study of the Rolls suggests an explanation — one of them is missing, and this is for the year 1238, which may therefore be taken as the probable date of her appointment. A missing link still remained; in the deed of the rectors the lady is named merely as Abbess C, and though the witnesses in the deed of the Edington register included the Rectors John and Adam, yet C. might have stood for another Abbess, but happily a third MS. turned up and clinched the whole matter; it was dated 1244, and spoke of the Abbess by her full name Cecilia.

However, the book *Head of Religious Houses: England & Wales 1216 – 1377 (Volume II)* states that although Liveing suggests "Cecily" became the next abbess in 1238, there is no real evidence for this!

It is significant that a good deal of timber was given by King Henry III to the Convent, and the gifts extend throughout his reign. The dormitories were repaired in 1230, sixteen oaks were given specifically for the fabric of the church in 1253, the Sacrist receiving six just two years earlier. The Early Pointed work in Romsey Abbey may therefore be dated circa 1240-60, which include the Abbacies of Cecilia and her successor, Constance. Some of the timber may have been used for the final roofing of the nave, and in any case there is ample evidence of building activity, both in the church and about the conventual buildings at this time.

A reference to one of the chief duties of chaplains, that of saying mass for the living and departed, occurs in an agreement between Abbess Cecilia and Joan de Nevill in 1244. Joan had given to the Church of Romsey a caracute (some 100 acres) of land in la Lee, which was to come into the possession of the convent "in free and perpetual alms at her death," in return the Abbess grants that when this takes place "the Abbey shall find and maintain a suitable chaplain, who shall celebrate divine service for the soul of Joan and of her ancestors and heirs for ever."

If Cecilia was, indeed, an abbess of Romsey Abbey, she was succeeded in 1247 by Constancia, or Constance de la Rochelle, late prioress of Romsey Abbey.

Reproduced from "Records of Romsey Abbey" by Henry G D Liveing, published in 1906. The full text is available on-line at https://archive.org/stream/cu31924028057226/cu31924028057226_djvu.txt (click on "See other formats" to view text in book form).