

## Abbess Constance (1247 – 1260)



Constance, 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 13<sup>th</sup> century.

A slight sketch is alone possible, and this is the more to be regretted because the 13<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> century opened, Matilda Patriz 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 Patriz dying in 1218-19 was followed by an unnamed Matilda (1219-30), whose successor was Matilda de Barbfle (1230-37); then came Isabella de Nevill for about a year (1237-38), and she was succeeded by Cecilia (1238-47) and then the Prioress Constance was the next Abbess (1247-60).

Little is known about these abbesses, although Abbess Constance has been known for many years from her seal, of which an illustration is provided. Furthermore, she is to be found in the Patent and also in the Close Roll, or register of letters closed or sealed up and directed to individuals, but the rolls for these years hadn't been printed at the time of Liveing's book in 1906.



SEAL OF ABBESS CONSTANCE.  
A.D. 1247-60.

In A History of the County of Berkshire: Volume 4 (originally published by Victoria County History, London, 1924), there is an entry concerning the parish of Enborne. The history of one of the four manors of Enborne, held in alod of King Edward the Confessor, is obscure until the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Abbess of Romsey had a holding in East Enborne, which may perhaps have been the same estate. The land was held of her by Nicholas Pigun, and in 1256 the king confirmed a grant of the rents here made by Constance Abbess of Romsey to John, son of Walter of Romsey until he should be provided with a benefice of the value of £30 per annum. Later the abbess appears to have enfeoffed Thomas de Abberbury of Donnington, who granted the lands for life to James de Crawley and Agnes his wife. This is new evidence that Romsey Abbey held land in Berkshire as well as Wiltshire.

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 Convent 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 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.

Steeple Ashton, a village 3 miles east of Trowbridge in Wiltshire, was a manor of Romsey Abbey until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. This benefice came to the attention of the Bishop of Salisbury in the time of Abbess Constance. This benefice lay a few miles from Edington, also within the Convent's manor. The Bishop's order is quoted at length on pages 73 and 74 of Henry G D Liveing's 1906 publication *Records of Romsey Abbey*.

Abbess Constance's exact date of death, probably in 1260, is unknown 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, 16<sup>th</sup> May - 6<sup>th</sup> June 1261, and continued as ruler for some seven years, when Alicia Walerand was appointed, 11<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> July 1268.

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](https://archive.org/stream/cu31924028057226/cu31924028057226_djvu.txt) (click on "See other formats" to view text in book form).