

Abbess Elizabeth Ryprose (1523/4 – 1539)



Elizabeth Ryprose, created by
The Mountbatten School, Romsey

Abbess Anne Westbroke died on Saturday, 21st November 1523, within the precincts of Romsey Abbey, and was buried before the high altar "as is customary". She was succeeded by Elizabeth Ryprose, the last abbess of the Convent before its suppression in 1539.

The business of electing the next abbess began on 24th November 1523 and continued until 25th January 1524. However, the actual election took place on Wednesday, 16th December 1523 when Elizabeth Ryprose was chosen.

As Elizabeth Ryprose had joined the nunnery more than twenty years before this date, she would therefore have been at least thirty-five or forty years old, and may have been more; she is not definitely mentioned as having held any lesser office before she became Abbess. There are indications that she was a capable woman and did her best to discharge the duties of her office faithfully under a variety of circumstances of a most anxious character.

A source of information about the internal condition of the nunnery is available through the episcopal registers. The chief interest of these registers is to be found in the visitations of the religious house by the bishops. There are a good many of these Visitation Injunctions still in existence, which were published between the 14th and 16th centuries, and they throw some light on the condition of the Monastery during two hundred and fifty years.

Early in the year 1527, Romsey was taken in hand, possibly at the Abbess Elizabeth's instigation, who must have had a time of severe trial by reason of the ill-doings of several sisters. In the face of the several visitations of Romsey Abbey during Bishop Fox's episcopate, it cannot be said that no efforts were made to reform the house before the storm fell upon the Monasteries. The account of this visitation reveals a lamentable state of things in the case of several of the

sisters, and closes with the saddest event that stains the pages of the Abbey's history:

Extract from Bishop Fox's Register.

"On 16th January, 1527, in the chapter-house of the Monastery of Romsey, before the vicar-general, sitting judicially, Lady Alice Gorsyn appeared, and confessed that she had used bad language with her sisters, and spread abroad reproachful and defamatory words of them. He absolved her from the sentence of excommunication, and enjoined

on her in penance, that if she used bad language in the future, and spread about defamatory words of them, a red tongue made of cloth should be used (in sua barba alba) on the barbe under the chin, and remain there for a month." This was to be repeated if she were again in fault, and the Abbess was to carry out this injunction in virtue of holy obedience.

However, it must be borne in mind that the accounts of visitations dwell solely upon the faults of the community and not upon the virtues, and therefore give only a one-sided view of the state of the house. What is virtuous and good and regular is left unrecorded, whilst what is evil and irregular and faulty is prominently brought forward, that it may be corrected. This fact must always be borne in mind in reading Visitation Injunctions, lest an unjust and unfair view be taken of the monastic life.

A letter from a John Foster to Sir Thomas Seymour, dated 28th December 1538, provides a glimpse of the state of the nunnery prior to its dissolution the following year – the list of 25 nuns and Abbess Elizabeth Ryprose is a far cry from the number of around 100 nuns in its heyday, from before the Norman Conquest up to the time of the Black Death in 1349:

Names of the Convent of Romsey :—

Elizabeth Ryperose, Abbess.	Margyt Parkyns.
Edith Banester, Prioress.	Margyt Dolman.
Katherine Waddham, Sub-Prss.	Jelyan More.
Jane Waddham, Sextoness.	Bowne Pownde.
Alys Whythynstall.	Mawde Stronge.
Abell Howrelston.	Mary Carell.
Jane Kersall.	Elysabeth Langryshe.
Agnes Pottenhall.	Agnes Hall.
Alys Gorphyer.	Maryan Goddard.
Jane Clyfford.	Alys Stanle.
Anne Fox.	Katheryn Westwode.
Eliz. Hyll.	Avys Edmondess.
Anne Butteler.	Agnes Harvy.

The story of the dissolution of Romsey Abbey is complex and some understanding of it can be gained from chapter XIV, The Suppression, of Henry G D Liveing's 1906 publication Records of Romsey Abbey.

After the dissolution of monasteries, one way in which the fate of their former abbesses and nuns was discovered through their wills. However, in Diana K. Coldicott's 1989 publication, Hampshire Nunneries, she writes that it seems strange that no wills have ever been found that could be attributed to any of the former nuns of Romsey Abbey. The last abbess, Elizabeth Ryprose, and the sisters all disappear from history except for Jane Wadham, one of the two daughters of a Sir Nicholas Wadham. According to a disposition that she made in 1541, Jane Wadham had been a reluctant nun at Romsey and "joined herself in matrimony with one John Foster" who had been chaplain and receiver at the abbey and was later granted the manor of [North] Baddesley which had belonged to the Hospitallers.

What a shame we have no record of the fate of Elizabeth Ryprose, the last abbess 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).