

## Abbess Johanna Gerneys (1349 – 1352)



Johanna Gerneys, created by  
Braishfield Primary School

Next to nothing is known about his lady other than she appears to have been listed, under the surname Gernays, as being present at the election of Johanna (Joan) Icthe on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1333, at which time she was sub-prioress.

Johanna Icthe sadly died of the Great Pestilence or Black Death in 1349. Besides the Abbess, at least one of the Prebendaries, Richard de Lusteshull, and also two Vicars, Nicholas de Boteleston and William de Bures, died, the latter only surviving his appointment for two months; and of the nuns no doubt a large proportion. The pestilence, and the troubles which came in its train, proved fatal to the Convent. Whilst at the election of Abbess Johanna Icthe in 1333 there were ninety nuns, in 1478 their number is found reduced to eighteen, and they never rose above twenty-five until their final suppression.

Johanna Gerneys was evidently one of the fortunate survivors of this traumatic time as she succeeded Joan Icthe between 6<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1349.

The Black Death left a legacy of troubles behind it, and these troubles were acutely felt throughout the country. Agriculture suffered severely, land went out of cultivation, and cattle wandered untended. Tenants could not be found to occupy farms, and labour was at a premium. The Statute of Labourers was passed with a view to check the high rate of wages and to confine natives to their own part of the country; but it did not meet with unqualified success. The Monasteries, inasmuch as they were great landowners, fell into extreme poverty. Johanna Gerneys presided over the convent, perhaps up to three years after this terrible event.

An Abbot Gasquet says "It would appear that at this time many, if not most, of the religious houses of the Diocese of Winchester were

protected and supported by the liberality of Bishop Edyndon and his relatives, whom he interested in the work of preserving from threatened destruction these monastic establishments." Romsey history illustrates the evil plight of the religious houses, and exhibits the paternal care of Bishop Edyndon. There are many documents, enrolled on the Close Roll of 1354, in which the state of the Convent's finance, and the agreements entered into between the Abbess and the Bishop, are described. The wording of the first document, dated 1351, during Johanna Gerney's tenure, is almost identical, in its commencement, with a similar one relating to S. Mary's, Winchester. The full wording of this charter can be found on pages 146 – 148 of Henry G D Liveing's 1906 publication Records of Romsey Abbey.

Johanna Gerneys was succeeded by Isabel de Camoys who was appointed Abbess on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1352, with the "usual formalities". Unfortunately, no list of the sisters present at the appointment survives. Such a list, so soon after the Black Death, would have been of much interest, because it would have shown how far the pestilence had affected the numbers in the convent and would have preserved the names of those sisters who had survived this terrible ordeal. We have no record of the exact date of death of Abbess Johanna Gerneys and why her tenure only lasted three years.

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