

# Lifestyle of the Nuns of Romsey Abbey

## 'A Day in the Life'

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### Who were the nuns of Romsey Abbey?

The Abbey was founded in 907 AD by the Saxon monarch, King Edward the Elder, and was re-founded as a Benedictine establishment 60 years later by King Edgar the Great after it had fallen into disrepair. This occurred mostly due to a lack of royal support from the previous king, Edwy, and a solemn atmosphere due to so many Viking raids throughout the south. With the Abbey's reconstruction came the grant of privileges effectively permitting the Abbey self-government, allowing it to become the third wealthiest Nunnery at the time of the Domesday Book in 1086. During the early Medieval Ages the capital of England was Winchester making it the primary royal residence at the time, which placed Romsey directly adjacent to the centre of royal power until the death of Henry III in 1272. In the centuries that followed, although the Abbey declined in prominence, it continued to be a key feature for royal visitations until its liquidation during the dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII in the sixteenth century.

The Abbey served as an establishment for wealthy unmarried daughters or widows that were enrolled through a sizable dowry. The nuns of Romsey were all from wealthy backgrounds, including royalty, and the Abbey was an important educational centre for high born and noble women. Romsey Abbey has therefore often been associated with many women of power. Notable figures include:

**Christina**, sister to Margaret, Queen of Scots, who came to Romsey in 1086 – although we don't know for certain if she was ever abbess

**Mathilda**, also known as Maud, became Queen of England in 1100 with her marriage to Henry I, encouraging later royal interest

**Princess Mary**, daughter of King Stephen, who joined the convent in 1155 and became Abbess in 1160.

Evidence from the Bishop of Winchester Visitation records show that by 1534, only five years before the dissolution of the Abbey, there were still women willing to enter into

monastic life at Romsey and they were of wealthy and often aristocratic families, although no longer royalty. Some examples include:

**Elizabeth Flemmyng**, 20 years old, from a wealthy shipping dynasty in medieval Southampton and

**Lady Elizabeth Langriche**, 17 years old, who was clearly a woman of wealth at the time to be given the title of 'lady'.

Evidence suggests that some of the nuns of Romsey may have lived in particular comfort. Reports by visiting Bishops make reference to the copious amounts of food consumed at feasts and the presence of several pets.

The nuns of Romsey Abbey were expected to follow the Benedictine monastic code known as the Rule of St. Benedict and they were devoted to living a holy life. They provided for the community often through their roles as teachers and their charitable deeds. However, evidence suggests that some of the nuns did not act in accordance with the monastic code and were therefore rather controversial. Although of course, they were an exception.

## The Rule of St. Benedict

The Rule of Benedict is considered a basic guide for those committed to monasticism and was an important factor in the spread of this lifestyle to the West. It is unknown exactly when St. Benedict wrote his Rule, however it is believed to be around 530AD in Monte Cassino and it is written in sixth-century Latin rather than classical. The contents of the Rule may not be entirely original ideas – it is likely that it comes from primitive monastic ideas, such as those from Egypt and the East, mixed with European culture and thought. The Rule itself contains a prologue and seventy-three chapters which gives ideals for many aspects of daily life, such as: clothing, sleeping arrangements, food and drink, care of the sick and rules related to leaving the Abbey.

The most important aspect of the rule was teaching of values such as:

<b>Obedience</b>	Nuns must obey the Abbess at all times
<b>Silence</b>	Expected to be silent during the day and night
<b>Humility</b>	To be humble, not full of pride
<b>Pray</b>	Seven times a day, even during the night
<b>Possessions</b>	Given only what they needed, they did not own anything and had no personal possessions
<b>Work</b>	Expected to work every day as well as pray

The final chapter of the Rule of Benedict is an epilogue stating that the Rule is not an 'ideal of perfection' but simply a step towards 'godliness' and it is meant mostly for beginners to spiritual life. Some, known as oblates, even followed the rule as far as they could without becoming a nun or living in a monastic environment.

## 'A Day in the Life'

In Saxon times, nuns came almost exclusively from the highest aristocratic backgrounds, seeing nunnery as a vocation and were genuinely devout to the church. However, these standards dropped over time as more women started to become nuns as it was seen as the only alternative to marriage and therefore had no true devotion to the church. This drop in standards formed the way in which the nuns of Romsey Abbey went about their daily lives.

The nuns' day consisted of a 2am wake up call for choir practise which most found particularly difficult. After practise, they would then go back to sleep until 6am. Next, the nuns would meet in the chapter to discuss any complaints they had been faced with and to allocate tasks for the day. Each day would finish with a few hours dedicated to work such as teaching or reading. Once this was finished, the nuns would go to bed at around 7pm. However, according to Bishops' visitations, the nuns would often give in to temptation and stay up for many hours and gossip amongst each other.

As the later inhabitants of Romsey Abbey had no real devotion to the church, it is understandable that they occasionally got bored. There is evidence of a breach of the monastic code with some nuns keeping pets like birds and rabbits, and many of the nuns would sneak into town to eat and drink with friends.

On average, the nuns would drink around one gallon of beer a day and although this seems a huge quantity, alcohol was much weaker and drinking water was often contaminated. The nuns had little choice but to consume large amounts of ale. Food consisted of a light breakfast and a heavy dinner with extra delicacies available around feast days. Although some Bishop of Winchester visitations in both 1387 and 1501 have suggested that nuns weren't eating enough and that the abbess should see that they did – it is likely that only the abbess was eating these feasts and delicacies!

## St. Ethelflaeda – one of our patron saints

Ethelflaeda was the daughter of one of King Edgar's noblemen, Ethelwold and when he died, King Edgar married his widow Elfrida, Ethelflaeda's stepmother. The king sent the orphaned girl to the care of Abbess Merwenna at Romsey Abbey and some people think that the nunnery was actually founded with Ethelflaeda in mind, in the hopes that she would become Abbess when she was old enough.

A 14<sup>th</sup> century document gives evidence for Ethelflaeda's holy life. As a self-imposed penance she would slip outside at night and stand in a running stream where she poured forth prayers to God, and there are also a number of miracles which she is said to have performed. For example: supposedly, when darkness fell she was able to read the Scriptures by light which glowed from her fingertips and, as Abbess, she once gave away all the Abbey money to the destitute, but after she had prayed the coffers were miraculously refilled.

These stories were meant to illustrate Ethelflaeda's character as a virtuous and holy woman. She is sometimes described as:

*"abundant in virtues, generous in alms, constant in watches, in speech vigilant, in mind humble, of joyful countenance and kindly mannered to the poor."*

Ethelflaeda did eventually become abbess at some point in the 990s and when she died, in around 1016, she was made a saint for her good works – today she is one of two patron saints of the Abbey and there is a small chapel dedicated to her.

The good deeds and virtuous character of St. Ethelflaeda clearly show that as a monastic establishment, Romsey was home to many women across its lifetime who were dedicated to God and to living a life of virtue and humility.

## Interesting cases of rebellious nuns - with examples from the Bishop of Winchester Visitations

However, there were exceptions to the precedent set by St. Ethelflaeda. On the contrary, Romsey Abbey has often been seen as a site of slight controversy and occasionally the nuns that lived there have either been plagued with scandal or have been caught breaching the code of the Rule of St. Benedict. The records of the Bishop of Winchester visitations is a primary source that gives many examples of the Romsey nuns acting out of line and it suggests changes that should be made and sanctions that should be placed on them. However, it must be taken into account that the Visitations were intended only to pick up on problems, rather than outline what was done well and therefore, they give a very unbalanced picture.

The nuns obviously had a strong educational background, as most Bishops Visitations were translated into French for the nuns to understand. However, regardless of this, a specific example from the Bishop of Winchester, Brother Henry, dated March 1311, suggests that some activities occurring at Romsey were unsuitable for religious life. He made suggestions of things to improve and suggests that the Abbey was not behaving as expected, for example:

- The nuns weren't rising early enough and ninth hour mass was not being held on time
- There were perhaps scandals of married women being allowed to stay in the Abbey
- Accounts weren't being submitted to be read aloud in the chapter every year and daily meetings of the nuns weren't being held properly
- The nuns weren't efficiently holding mass for the blessed Virgin
- The key to the seal was supposed to be held by three different nuns and letters requiring the seal were not being read aloud to the chapter and publically

- There is also the suggestion that the sale of lands, possessions and liberties was being made occasionally without the approval of Winchester
- Nuns appeared to be spending the night outside the Abbey in the town of Romsey and eating and drinking there
- The visitations suggested that the Abbey had too many nuns and they were told not to admit any more
- Younger nuns were not obeying senior ones and all were advised to denounce rebellious nuns so that they could be punished
- Romsey appeared to be paying for the funerals of deceased nuns by selling their personal possessions (given to them by the Abbey)

These examples, from the Bishop of Winchester Visitations clearly shows that the nuns (and also abbesses) of Romsey were not acting in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict in many instances. Other Bishops Visitation records suggest that the Abbey kept unsuitable pets such as hunting dogs and even monkeys and there are also indications of drunkenness by some nuns visiting the town. A final example of the nuns' irresponsible behaviour is seen in a letter from John de Pontissara, Bishop of Winchester, to the abbess of Romsey – the exact date is unknown, although it could be from around 1292. The tone of the letter is one of wrath and it suggests that some people of Romsey had broken into the park at Merton (now Hursley) and caused much damage. The Bishop demands that these people be punished and that this is not to happen again, also mentioning that this is not the correct way to return the favours that have been given to Romsey by Winchester and that the abbess and Abbey should control their people. This is clear evidence that the nuns of Romsey appeared not to be behaving up to the expected standard.

Romsey Abbey is therefore often seen as a controversial place in terms of English monastic establishments, as the nuns and abbesses appeared to break the Rule of Benedict on a relatively regular basis. However, it must be remembered that there were nuns at Romsey with a genuine desire to follow the monastic code, especially before the last few years of the Abbey's lifetime – and actually, even the last two abbesses of Romsey began making improvements.

## The Case of Abbess Elizabeth Brooke

A very infamous example of disorderly behaviour at Romsey Abbey, however, is the case of Abbess Elizabeth Brooke, who held this position from 1472-1502. She was found guilty of adultery as well as many other breaches of the monastic code. She also admitted to Archbishop Morton that the Abbey was £80 in debt during her abbacy. The influence of Brooke supposedly soiled Romsey's reputation for years afterwards and it was perhaps an important factor allowing for the dissolution of Romsey Abbey by Henry VIII in 1539.

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Ultimately, the nuns of Romsey Abbey are often considered slightly controversial, probably due to the impact of abbesses such as Elizabeth Brooke. They were expected to follow the monastic code of St. Benedict and on certain occasions these were breached by the inhabitants of Romsey. However, these cases were in the minority. Most of the nuns were committed to living a holy life and providing for their community, acting in a similar way to

St. Ethelflaeda, our patron saint. Only as the Abbey began to reach its final years, and was becoming a dumping ground for unwanted widows and unmarried daughters who didn't have a true vocation with monasticism, did the controversy at Romsey increase. It is also likely that Romsey Abbey was not atypical as a monastic establishment as many nunneries would probably have been facing similar problems as the medieval period went on.