

Abbess Phillipa de Stokes (1298 – 1307)



Phillipa de Stokes, created by
Braishfield Primary School

Following the death of Alice Walerand on 10th April 1298 after a 30 year abbacy, four abbesses succeeded, for a similar period of time, between 1298 and 1333: Phillipa de Stokes (1298 - 1307), Clemencia de Guldeford (1307 - 1314), Alicia de Wyntereshulle (1315), Sybil Carbonel (1315 - 1333). The first two fell into bad health or became infirm after about six years of rule, and attorneys in each case were appointed to carry on the business of the house.

Whilst little is known about these Abbesses, a fresh source of information about the internal condition of the nunnery becomes available. Before the last quarter of the thirteenth century, there are no episcopal registers of the diocese from which information may be drawn. It is said that the books before Bishop John de Pontoise's Episcopate have been lost; in any case they are not to be found in the Bishop's registry, but from 1282 onwards the registers continue without a break, except for a lost book of Bishop Beaufort's, covering the years 1416-1447. From these registers a good deal of information can be gleaned; they give the appointments of clergy, whether canons or vicars; they describe with elaborate detail the election of abbesses, and in some cases they yield the names of the sisters who formed the community, adding the titles of those who were officers. At one time a license for the removal of a body to a more honourable place of burial is given; at another a dispute as to the use of the church by the townspeople is settled; but the chief interest of these registers is to be found in the visitations of the religious house by the bishops.

The Diocesan had the right of visitation in Romsey Abbey. After service he entered the Chapter House, questioned the sisters as to any irregularities, and formulated the results in a set of Injunctions, which were sent to the Abbess to be read frequently in Chapter, that faults might be corrected. 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. But it must be borne in mind that they 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.

Bishop John de Pontoise made a Visitation in 1302, and his successor, Bishop Woodlock, in 1311. Their Injunctions are not altogether unlike those issued by Archbishop Peckham, when he visited the Abbey c. 1282, indeed, his articles are expressly referred to.

In the first of these Visitations, made during the time of Phillipa de Stokes, serious fault is found in matters relating to the business of the house, such as rendering the accounts, keeping the seal, and the letting of the land. Some of the servants had given trouble, and some slackness in observing the etiquette in the departments of the pantry, buttery, and bakery had crept in, the rule of Monasteries in these matters being very precise. More serious is the reference made to nuns staying with friends in the town, a practice which is noticed again and again in later times; but the most serious matter is the late rising of the Convent, and the irregular hours at which the divine offices were said. Still there is nothing scandalous, and the Convent, no doubt, continued a steady and peaceful observance of the rules of Saint Benedict, distributed its alms, and entertained strangers as in duty bound, troubled somewhat by a want of energy in its ruler, who was becoming infirm, and unable to discharge the very responsible duties of her office, on which so much depended.

Phillipa de Stokes died after less than a decade as abbess and was succeeded by Clemencia de Guldeford in 1307.

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