

'The Nuns of Romsey Abbey'

A fact sheet for younger people

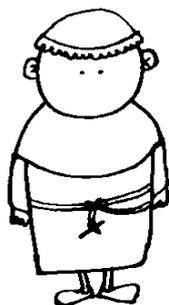
Who were the nuns?



The Abbey became home to Benedictine Nuns in 967 AD when it was re-founded by King Edgar the Peaceable. The nuns that lived there were very powerful women in Romsey which is unusual for women of this time. They were devoted to living a holy life and provided for the community through charity work and teaching.

The Abbey was very important as a learning centre. The nuns came from rich backgrounds, some of them were daughters and future wives of Kings, such as: **Christina**, sister to Margaret, Queen of Scots, who joined the Abbey 1086, **Mathilda**, became Queen of England in 1100 when she married King Henry I, and Princess **Mary**, daughter of King Stephen, who became Abbess in 1160.

Can you draw a face on the nun?



Rule of St. Benedict:

The Rule of St. **Benedict** is a simple guide for monks and nuns. The Rule makes suggestions for daily life such as: what to wear, where and when to sleep, what to eat and drink, how to care for the sick and when they were allowed to leave the Abbey. It also teaches religious ideas, such as: (read from the scroll)

Rule of St. Benedict:

- Nuns must obey the Abbess (most important nun) at all times
- Nuns were expected to be silent during the day and night
- Nuns were expected to pray seven times a day, even during the night!
- Nuns were not allowed to own personal possessions
- Nuns were expected to work every day, as well as pray

A Day in the Life:

2am:	Wakeup call for choir practice, then back to bed
6am:	Wake up and the nuns were given tasks to do
Afternoon/evening:	Teaching and reading
7pm:	Curfew (some of the nuns would stay up late into the night and gossip, which was not allowed)

The nuns seemed to drink lots of beer, but it was much weaker than alcohol is today. Their eating habits consisted of a light breakfast and a heavy dinner with some extra treats around feast days, but this was only for abbesses (most important nuns)!

St. Ethelflaeda - one of our patron saints

Ethelflaeda was the daughter of one of King Edgar's nobles called Ethelwold. When Ethelwold died, King Edgar married his widow Elfrida who was Ethelflaeda's stepmother. The king sent the orphaned girl in the care of Abbess Merwenna at Romsey. Some people think that the nunnery was founded with Ethelflaeda in mind and that she should become Abbess when she was old enough.

A 14th century document describes Ethelflaeda's holy life. When she thought she had done wrong she used to slip outside at night and stand in a running stream where she prayed many times to God.

A number of stories are about miracles which Ethelflaeda performed: for example, when darkness fell, she was able to read the Scriptures by light which glowed from her fingertips; as Abbess, she once gave away all the Abbey money to the poor, but after she prayed the Abbey had their treasury refilled.

These stories were told to show Ethelflaeda's character, which is 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 become abbess sometime in the 990s. She died on October 23 in a year around 1016 and later she was made a saint for her good works.

Nuns who misbehaved

Over time, some of the nuns did not go to Romsey Abbey by choice so they had less interest in the church, and would sometimes get bored and misbehave. It was strictly forbidden to keep pets in the **Abbey**, but evidence shows that some nuns broke the rules by having pets, such as rabbits, birds, hunting dogs and even monkeys! On other occasions, they would sneak out late at night with their friends to eat and drink, which was also against the rules.



Bishops of Winchester came to visit Romsey Abbey, and recorded things that some of the nuns were doing wrong and made suggestions for how they could improve.

An example:

In March 1311, Bishop Brother Henry recorded all of the ways in which the nuns of **Romsey** should improve their behaviour. The nuns were told to:

- Wake up earlier to get to mass on time, at 9am
- Not to spend time out in town during the night
- Younger nuns to obey and show respect to older nuns and the **abbess**

Abbess Elizabeth Brooke, who lived in the Abbey from 1472-1502, is one of the most badly behaved nuns at Romsey Abbey. She broke the Rule of Benedict many times and was found guilty - for example, she admitted to Archbishop Morton that the Abbey owed £80 that they hadn't repaid yet.

Overall, it may seem like the nuns were always misbehaving but this was not true! Apart from a minority of cases like Elizabeth Brooke, the nuns were committed to providing for their community. Most nuns acted in the same way as St. Ethelflaeda through living a holy life and helping the poor.

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Word Search Activity

Can you find these words?

Christina
Mathilda
Mary
Benedict
Pray
Nuns
Abbey
Bishops
Romsey
Abbess
Elizabeth Brooke