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# The Abbey of St. Albans

from 1300 to the Dissolution  
of the Monasteries

THE STANHOPE ESSAY

1911

X

BY

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# Introductory

## Introductory.

IN the later Middle Ages the Abbey of St. Albans was the most brilliant, though by no means the wealthiest,<sup>1</sup> of the English monasteries. There was ample reason for this pre-eminence. Proximity to London kept its members abreast of the times and freed them from the stain of provincialism, and its position on the Great North Road ensured as its frequent guests the greatest men in the kingdom. Its hospitality became proverbial, and Matthew Paris records that there was room in the monastic stables for three hundred horses at one time. Always, too, there was the glamour of literary greatness as well as its association with St. Alban,<sup>2</sup> England's proto-martyr, whose genuine relics by universal consent it was admitted to possess. Besides these special traits the Abbey bore the usual insignia of exempt houses—royal foundation, a wide franchise with episcopal jurisdiction, and a place for its abbot among the Lords in Parliament. The homage of some twelve daughter houses or cells, while not increasing its material prosperity, added considerably to its dignity.

<sup>1</sup> In view of the fact that the Abbey contained sixty monks, St. Albans was relatively slenderly endowed. Cf. below, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> The shrines of St. Osyth and St. Amphibalus, also at St. Albans, were scarcely less famous.

The growth of the St. Albans legend is proof that it was no unconscious greatness the members enjoyed. In the eleventh century, when the monastery had become 'the school of religious observance for all England' arose the idea of a miraculous origin; it received final consecration in the narrative of Matthew Paris. Henceforth, it was sober history that King Offa founded the Abbey on August 1st, 793, when the ground opened miraculously, revealing the body of the martyr himself with a golden band around his forehead inscribed with his name. From this point its history was made to run on without a break; the names of successive abbots were given with the dates of their reigns, and the acquisition of existing possessions attributed to various of them by a method hidden from us. From a great deal of tradition little more can be deduced than that the Abbey was of royal foundation and exempt from episcopal jurisdiction, that it was early endowed with a wide franchise, and, by analogy, that morals and discipline would be by no means strict in Anglo-Saxon times.

With the advent of the Norman Conquest we are on surer ground. Under Abbot Paul (1077—1097) the Abbey was purged of the abuses of the Anglo-Saxon period and a stricter discipline enforced, although only by the loss of exemption from episcopal control. The monastery was now rebuilt on a more magnificent scale, and for nearly two centuries St. Albans was a model house. Under the saintly John de Cella

Growth of  
St. Albans  
Legend.

Effect  
of the  
Conquest.

(1195—1214), a stern ascetic, the House perhaps reached its zenith. At no other time were feasts and vigils so strictly observed by the monks, who for fifteen years gave up drinking wine in order that the refectory and dormitory, then ruinous, might be rebuilt. During the Norman period St. Albans had been endowed by many gifts of manors. On some of these cells were founded,<sup>1</sup> but most of them were simply absorbed into the monastic estates, and of course brought within the Abbot's jurisdiction. The effect of this territorial enrichment of the monastery was twofold. First, it tended to subordinate religious to secular functions: the Abbot became primarily a man of business absorbed in the administration of the estates. Secondly, it attracted the covetous glances of needy kings and popes. At the very commencement of the thirteenth century the Abbot had to face a reorganised Papacy intent upon obtaining funds for the realisation of its strong political ambitions. The Abbey had scarcely escaped the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Lincoln<sup>2</sup> (1163) when it fell under stricter subjection to Pope Innocent III. For the future each abbot was to go in person to Rome to secure confirmation of his election, that is to say to be mulcted in a vast sum of money.<sup>3</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> About twelve cells were founded; the most important being Tynemouth and Wymondham, in Northumberland and Norfolk respectively.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum I*, p. 489.

<sup>3</sup> *Gesta Abbatum I*, p. 307; *II*, p. 3. Still more oppressive was the enactment of a General Lateran Council under Innocent IV, by which the Abbot had to visit Rome, either in person or by proxy, once every three years. The cost of such journeys and the extortion of the Holy See were regarded as a heavy grievance.

a lesser degree the monastery was menaced by the Crown. Every vacancy put the convent at the mercy of the King's escheator, who in practice could, and often did, exact far more than the sums to which he was entitled. Indeed, both kings and popes were coming to regard the Abbey as a sure source of wealth in any emergency, and they did not scruple to multiply excuses for continual exactions.<sup>1</sup> These dangers of papal and kingly oppression were self-evident, but in the gradual disintegration of feudal society lay a more subtle peril. The monastery's failure to adapt itself to the new system of relationships which were springing up on lay estates brought upon it the further misfortune of unpopularity.

The disfavour incurred by the attempt to retain the manorial system was increased when the organisation itself began to show signs of decay. The decline of religious fervour was followed by a gradual relaxation of monastic discipline, and comparative luxury invaded the cloister. After the death of John of Berkhamstead in 1301 the extent of the falling off began to be apparent. For the next generation the convent was in an unhealthy condition. But though weakened, the organisation was far from being destroyed. At times like this the traditional routine was invaluable. The writing of history, for instance, was continued,

Decay  
of the  
Monastery.

'Iste quoque Abbas,' says the chronicler (*Gesta Abbatum I*, p. 312), referring to Abbot John of Hertford (elected 1235), 'in novitate sua multis exactionibus fatigabatur et expensis, sed prae omnibus Romanorum oppressionibus novis et inauditis coepit molestari.'

<sup>1</sup> See for example, *Gesta Abbatum I*, p. 397.

and the period is still known to us by the works of John de Trokelowe and Henry de Blaneford, contemporary chroniclers.

At this point our subject begins. The period may be broken up into two parts, and a line of division is supplied by the year 1396, in which Abbot Thomas de la Mare died. Taking our stand, first at 1396, and then at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, we shall look back over the two periods under review and summarize the chief tendencies by which they are marked.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The economic history of the Abbey cannot fairly be so divided, and will therefore be treated in Section II from 1300—1539.





# I

## The Revival within the Abbey during the 14th Century



## I.

The Revival within the Abbey during  
the 14th Century.

THE 'fourteenth century revival' is perhaps too dignified a name for the feeble efforts at reformation in the majority of English monasteries. Most houses failed utterly to arrest the decay that had set in during the thirteenth century, and for the rest of their existence underwent a slow internal dissolution which was merely consummated by the measures of Henry VIII. To this rule there were exceptions. At Bury St. Edmunds,<sup>1</sup> for instance, while John Tymworth was abbot (1379—1390), there was a marked revival accompanied by a little outburst of chronicle writing. More important was the recovery of St. Albans, where a conscious effort towards reform is the main thread of its history. The reigns of four abbots which cover the first half of the century witnessed the restoration of discipline: the long abbacy of Thomas de la Mare (1349—1396) was devoted to the repair of the Abbey finances, which had been depleted by the frequent vacancies. The steps by which first the rule, and then the finances,

<sup>1</sup> *Mems. of St. Edmundsbury.* Arnold. Vol. III, passim.

were strengthened indicate considerable continuity of reforming purpose in successive abbots.

The regulations issued by John de Maryns<sup>1</sup> (1302—1308) for the reform of the convent and cells reveal the extent of the decay. The rule of silence, it

Reform of the Discipline. appears, had been all but forgotten; swearing had grown common, and monks, forgetful of their vow of poverty, were found to possess private property. In the cells the state of affairs was even more deplorable. Brethren were known to insult the priors, whose authority had grown too weak to ensure adequate punishment of offenders. Reference is made to the existence of immorality in the convent. It was necessary to prohibit brethren from intercourse with women, from wandering about singly, and from drinking in the town. The possession of greyhounds for hunting was also forbidden.

Such was the condition of the convent and cells in the first years of the century. Abbot Maryns, though willing and anxious to carry out the necessary reformation, was not strong enough to enforce his will upon the monks. Moreover, the penalties prescribed for offences in his regulations were wholly inadequate, and to this must be attributed the persistence of the evils which they were intended to cure.

The decline of discipline during the last years of the thirteenth century had been accompanied by a loosening of the authority of the mother abbey over its cells. It appears that some of them were not

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Abbatum II*, p. 95.

prepared to admit even a nominal dependence on the abbot. Making as its pretext the huge exactions of Hugh of Eversdon (Maryns' successor), the cell of Binham,<sup>1</sup> led by its Prior, William Somerton, and supported by the local gentry, broke into open revolt. A long contest followed, with appeals to both King and Pope, but in the end the abbot was successful. The rebellious priory was brought back to its allegiance, and Hugh of Eversdon proceeded systematically to extract formal submissions from the several cells. A grave feature of the quarrel with Binham was the influence exerted by Thomas of Lancaster, Sir Hugh Despenser, and various notables who contrived more than once to force the hand of the abbot. The interference of laymen in the affairs of the monastery is a sure sign of its weakness.

Abbot Hugh was a poor creature to govern so great a House. Avaricious, vain, extortionate, a pampered favourite of Edward II, he oppressed the cells and exasperated the townsmen. On his death in 1327 the latter broke into revolt. The whole of England was at this time in a state of anarchy and wretchedness only too clearly reflected in the condition of St. Albans. The House was desperately poor and burdened with debt, and the moral condition of the monks is admitted by the chronicler to have been very low. Degeneracy, in fact, had gone to greater lengths than at the beginning of the century. The Constitutions of Abbot Wallingford<sup>2</sup> deal

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Abbatum II*, appendix, p. 469.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum II*, p. 130.

with the most elementary rules of conduct and morality, the frequent breach of which could be the only reason for their publication. The Abbot, however, was a saintly man, and made persistent efforts to correct abuses. In a formal visitation of the cells he punished severely all cases of incontinence, and having compiled two books of statutes, did his best to enforce them. The monks, unused to so strict a master, grumbled at Wallingford's severity, but before his death matters had begun definitely to mend. In his later years he even had leisure to turn his attention to the cells. The Priory of Redburn was completely re-organised, and the government of the dependent house of St. Mary de Prez systematised for the first time.

Michael de Mentmore (1335—1349), who succeeded Richard Wallingford as abbot, continued the work of reform on the lines laid down by his predecessor, devoting much attention to the cells. He did what he could to make the life of the leper brethren of St. Julian more tolerable, and drew up a new rule for the nuns of Sopwell. A peculiar interest attaches to the rule of this Michael Mentmore. His local effort towards reform came into contact with the wider attempt of Pope Benedict XII to improve the Benedictine Order. With the increasing lethargy of the Black Monks, the intervals between General Chapters had grown greater and greater. Benedict XII abolished the two provinces into which hitherto the English Benedictines had been divided and revived triennial General Chapters meeting at

Northampton. To Abbot Michael, significantly enough, the Pope entrusted the execution of these measures. The abbot entered heartily into the work, exhorting and encouraging individuals and actively helping in the restoration of religion in places where it had altogether decayed.

Thus when Abbot Michael, having been struck down by the Black Death, was succeeded by Thomas de la Mare, the foundations of reform had been laid. It fell to the lot of the new abbot to complete and adorn the work begun by his predecessors.

The Abbacy  
of Thomas  
de la Mare.

Thomas de la Mare, who ruled the Abbey for almost fifty years, has perhaps left a deeper mark on the history of St. Albans than any other abbot. He was no mere political prelate. For his age he was what would be called a good man; but before all things he was an able administrator and a stern though just ruler. Indefatigable in upholding the convent's rights against every outside power, he knew no compromise in his exaction of full obedience from all within the House. To his biographer, credulity, the employment of unworthy officers and his lavish outlay as President of General Chapters were the only flaws in an otherwise perfect character. No censure is passed upon his craftiness in evading the Statute of Mortmain, nor are certain acts of crude revenge adversely commented upon. Besides supreme ability, he certainly possessed an exceptional personality, and towards the close of his life was



regarded almost as a saint by the brethren.<sup>1</sup> The greatest of the later abbots, he has perhaps suffered unduly at the hands of his editor, who conceived of him only 'as that most litigious of abbots . . . Thomas de la Mare.'<sup>2</sup> His tenants do not appear to have looked upon him as a tyrant. The orderly character of the revolt of 1381 at St. Albans was in marked contrast with the scenes of pillage and murder at Bury St. Edmunds. The St. Albans tenants rose to assert their rights—the men of Bury to avenge their wrongs.

Abbot Thomas displayed an astonishing activity in every department of monastic life. The church services were entirely revised, and particular care was bestowed upon the singing, for the regulation of which the Abbot drew up a new ordinal. A series of practical reforms followed; in monastery and cells the discipline was more strictly enforced. The general raising of the monastic standard was exemplified by his refusal to admit illiterate nuns into the house of St. Mary de Prez, and by his careful provisions regulating the duties of the Benedictine students at Oxford. At first, indeed, the rigidity of his discipline caused many of the monks to grumble, and some even to secede. But his method was effective. Before long the Abbey grew famous, not only in England, but on the Continent, and monks were often sent to St. Albans to be trained in monastic discipline for the benefit of their own houses.

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, pp. 396-423. <sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, p. x.

The position of St. Albans as the premier Benedictine house was recognised by the election of the Abbot as president of the successive General Chapters at Northampton. In these assemblies De la Mare issued a comprehensive series of constitutions on the discipline of the Order. Looking to the future of learning, he directed every abbot and prior to maintain at Gloucester Hall<sup>1</sup> (Oxford) a number of students proportionate to the size of his house. He himself supported many more students than the number of his monks required. Edward III's commission to the Abbot to visit all the monasteries in the King's presentation is a striking tribute to his thoroughness. A visitation of Abbot Thomas was far from being a mere formality, and shed a valuable sidelight on the condition of many a great abbey.<sup>2</sup> 'In them,' says the chronicler, 'religion had well-nigh disappeared.' The proper conduct of the monastic rule had been forgotten, and serious abuses were rife. At the Abbeys of Eynsham, Abingdon and Battle, De la Mare worked wonders of reform; at Reading he composed differences between the Abbot and the monks who had practically risen in rebellion; at Chester he took the extreme step of deposing the Abbot. For these services he was

<sup>1</sup> St. Albans probably kept a 'studium' at Gloucester Hall from 1337. De la Mare, John Moote, Hethworth and Whethamstede were all considerable benefactors of the College, among their gifts being a chapel, library, and the rebuilding of the old wooden house in stone. For the relations of the Abbey and Gloucester Hall, see Daniel and Barker's *History of Worcester College*, chapter III.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum II*, 406.

made a Privy Councillor, and henceforth stood in high favour with Edward III. St. Albans, in fact, was at the height of its reputation. The story seriously told in the chronicle of De la Mare, in a moment of despondency, only being dissuaded from resigning his abbacy by the repeated supplications of King John of France<sup>1</sup> and the Black Prince sufficiently illustrates his social eminence. As for the Abbey, it even eclipsed its old rival, the Abbey of Westminster. It was in vain the Abbot of Westminster claimed the first seat among the abbots in Parliament. So long as de la Mare lived, that seat was occupied by the more important, more brilliant figure of the Abbot of St. Albans.

Its inability to resist kingly and papal extortion during the thirteenth century left the Abbey in a state of miserable poverty. Financial comfort could be restored only by regulating these exactions. This the abbots appear to have realised, and John of Berkhamstead's (1290—1301) new arrangement<sup>2</sup> with the King is the first step towards a remedy of the evil. The existing debt was cancelled, and the Abbey secured possession of the revenues during a vacancy in return for a payment of 1,000 marks. Any advantage which this exclusion of the King's escheator might have con-

<sup>1</sup> Living in England in captivity. He was a close friend of the Abbot, and spent much of his time at St. Albans.

<sup>2</sup> The need of it had long been felt: the privilege had, in fact, been bought in two particular cases, *viz.*, in 1235 for 300 marks, and in 1260 for 600 marks. The figures (as well as the new arrangement to pay 1000 marks in the future) indicate the growth of governmental extortion.

ferred upon the Abbey was nullified by the unhappy occurrence of no less than five vacancies between 1290 and 1349. Each of these involved not only the payment of 1000 marks to the King, but a far more serious expenditure to secure papal confirmation. The financial embarrassment of the House surely increased.<sup>1</sup> As a result of a special appeal to the Pope, Abbot Hugh secured a licence to receive special subsidies from the cells in order to lighten the debt.<sup>2</sup> But from papal exactions there was no escape. In vain the Abbot begged to be excused from personal attendance at the Curia. His presence was insisted on; the usual enormous fees were exacted, and a licence to contract a loan to meet the expense thus incurred was the only relief afforded him.<sup>3</sup> Abbot Hugh early became a favourite of Edward II, and the King's lavish endowments might well have served to repair the Abbey's fortunes but for the extensive building operations which were necessary. The church fabric was in a ruinous condition; walls were falling and roofs tumbling in, and Abbot Hugh had little choice but to restore the south side of the church. Small wonder that the debt which was 2,300 marks in 1308 was more than double that sum twenty years later.

At the accession of Richard Wallingford the

<sup>1</sup> The almost chronic dearth at St. Albans in the early fourteenth century was a further misfortune. In 1314 the price of provisions in the town was excessive, and Edward endeavoured to fix it by Ordinance (*Trokelow*, p. 89).

<sup>2</sup> *Cal. Papal Registers: Papal Letters II*, 1305-1342, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Cal. Papal Registers: Papal Letters II*, 1305-1342, p. 75.

Abbey's condition attracted the notice of the Crown, and a commission was appointed<sup>1</sup> in 1327 to 'inquire by whose negligence the existing defects and dissipation of the Abbey's revenues had been brought about.' Two years later (perhaps as a result of the commission) Abbot Richard received permission to live abroad for three years 'to avoid the burden of too great expense.'<sup>2</sup> In this unsatisfactory condition the Abbey finances remained till 1349, when the Black Death visited St. Albans with unusual severity. Abbot Michael and three-fourths of the convent perished, and there is little doubt that the mortality among the Abbey's tenants was high.<sup>3</sup> This catastrophe must have further impoverished the Abbey, and the 1000 marks due to the King on de la Mare's accession could only be paid by instalments.<sup>4</sup>

De la Mare realised that the payment to King and Pope of large sums at irregular intervals was fatal to any organisation of the Abbey's finances, and to him is due the credit of having conceived the more workable system of annual contributions. Soon after the outbreak of the Great Schism, a petition was addressed to the Pope, supported by commendatory

The Financial  
Measures of  
de la Mare.

<sup>1</sup> *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1327-1330, p. 84.*

<sup>2</sup> *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1327-1330, p. 362.*

<sup>3</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III, p. 147, 'per epidemias hominum et mortalitatem bestiarum facultates monasterii redditae sunt exiles.'* Also Walsingham, *Hist. Ang. I, 273.* 'At that time,' says Walsingham, 'villages formerly very populous were bereft of inhabitants, and so thickly did the plague lay them low that there scarcely survived enough to bury the dead . . . Many were of opinion that scarce a tenth of the population survived.'

<sup>4</sup> *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1348-1350, p. 476.*

letters from the King, John of Gaunt, Princess Joanna, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Abbot prayed that in return for an annual payment of twenty marks the election of succeeding abbots should receive confirmation without their personal attendance at Rome.<sup>1</sup>

The arguments which the envoys to Rome were to employ in the hope of winning the Pope's consent to the proposed measure show clearly the difficulties of the Abbey at this time. The whole annual revenue had fallen to £1,053.<sup>2</sup> Of this, £465 was assigned to the Abbot—'and to the said Abbot pertains the entertainment of noble guests and of all laymen, and the prosecution of pleas in the various royal courts; which, inasmuch as laymen are more hostile to monks than they were wont, are more expensive than formerly, and also occur more frequently.' The remaining £600 was considered inadequate for the maintenance of the convent.

An objection to this plea of poverty, *viz.*, that the Abbey was really much richer than it represented, owing to the existence of its numerous cells, was anticipated. The cells were said to be a charge on the mother house, which at its own expense was continually involved in litigation on their behalf.

Hospitality, it appeared, was the greatest burden the Monastery had to bear. 'Also the Lord Pope is to be informed that the Monastery of St. Albans

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, p. 146. A minor demand was liberty for the abbot-elect to receive benediction at the hand of whatever bishop he chose.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, p. 148. *Summa taxae omnium bonorum.*

is near London, where the King's Parliaments, Convocation, and other assemblies of nobles and clergy are held. And the nobles and magnates of the realm, both on their journey there and on their return, are entertained at the Abbey, to its great expense and loss.' The dearness of provisions, owing to the proximity of rich neighbours, had also helped to impoverish the Abbey, and finally, the partial felling of its woods to pay its debts to the King and Roman Court had diminished a former source of income.

At this time the Pope stood in great need of English support, and might therefore have been expected readily to grant Abbot Thomas's requests. Yet the desired privileges were secured only by lavish bribery among court officials. William le Strete, one of the Abbey's proctors at Rome, writes to the Abbot<sup>1</sup>: 'And I hope that the business will come to a good end; but I do not know it at all for certain, seeing that the Pope is very capricious.' He goes on to say that the Pope has not yet read a single letter from the Abbot, 'and be pleased to know that your business cannot be carried out here through letters from anyone, but only through money.' Negotiations were continued until 1396. In that year Richard II addressed a further appeal to Boniface IX: 'Whereas . . . the Monastery of St. Albans<sup>2</sup>,' he wrote, ' . . . has its means grievously diminished by the heavy expenses of the visits of the abbots-elect to tne

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Cal. Papal Letters IV*, p. 293. Sep., 1396.

Apostolic See to obtain confirmation and benediction . . . . It is situate in the uttermost parts of the earth, and is in comparison with other monasteries of the realm over slenderly endowed, and that too in a barren place; whereas therein beyond the other monasteries of the realm the highest devotion, regular discipline and daily hospitality flourishes; whereas if each abbot-elect were bound to make such visit the number of monks would be minished, their devotion chilled, and hospitality be not observed . . . ' This letter had the desired effect, and the Abbot's petition was granted forthwith.<sup>1</sup>

The weakness of the central power during Richard II's minority had offered a favourable opportunity for making a similar arrangement with the Crown. In lieu of a payment of 1,000 marks in each vacancy, Abbot Thomas had induced the Government to accept an annual tribute of fifty marks.<sup>2</sup>

Half a century earlier such measures might have completely restored the Abbey's finances, and even during the fifteenth century they sensibly lessened its embarrassment. More they could not do, for the decay of the economic system was to make prosperity impossible.

<sup>1</sup> The grant of the same privilege to the Abbey of Evesham in 1363 was used as a strong argument by de la Mare during negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, p. 143. In 1396, Bury St. Edmunds made a similar arrangement, the annual payment being fixed at £40 (*Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1396-99, p. 21). About a year later, following the example of St. Albans, Abbot Cratfield, of Bury St. Edmunds, made an agreement with Boniface IX identical with that of de la Mare (*Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1396-99, p. 406).



Although the Abbot was a lay magnate as well as a spiritual peer, it is remarkable how seldom the Monastery was involved in political and party strife.

Political Attitude  
of Abbot and  
Convent in the  
14th Century.

The current of life in the cloister but rarely mingled with the stream of national life. Occasionally a great noble, like Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Lincoln, might be the Abbot's enemy, and try to do him hurt; more often the Abbey enjoyed the favour of nobles of all parties, of Yorkist as of Lancastrian kings, and in return offered indiscriminate hospitality. Such an attitude tended to deprive the Abbey of all political or party value. A natural bias, it should perhaps be added, was displayed in favour of the King, upon whose goodwill the prosperity of the House in large measure depended. Abbot Hugh of Eversdon, for instance, was one of Edward II's 'court party,' and was richly endowed by that King. Again, Abbot Thomas was a close friend and supporter of Edward III, as also of the Black Prince. But this attitude was after all little more than the loyalty which they owed to the King. Their support did not extend to party quarrels, to 'loving those whom he loved, and shewing enmity towards such as were his enemies.'

This detached political attitude is one reason why monastic chronicles are often so intolerably dull. Yet politics were as keen and as absorbing in the Middle Ages as they are now, and monks and Abbot must have followed their course, and criticised the actors, with as much freedom as the men of to-day,

In favour of St. Albans it must be said that, in comparison with other monasteries, its chronicles are singularly living and human. In those written during the revival of historical writing under the guidance of Thomas Walsingham, the political sympathies of the convent during the critical period of Richard II's reign are fully revealed.

Towards Richard II their feelings were hostile, if not contemptuous. Walsingham, in his history of the reign, describes with unction the King's childish behaviour during his fits of ungovernable anger,<sup>1</sup> his violent words on more than one occasion to his Parliaments, and his absurd extravagance in dress. With righteous indignation he relates how Richard, on his way to London, borrowed from the monastery a palfrey, which he never returned. Another chronicler tells with scorn of the King's visit to the Abbey in 1394, when large concessions were promised, but never fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> De la Mare's successor, John Moote, was apparently on equally indifferent terms with the King. 'This Abbot,' says the chronicler, 'gave to King Richard for the purpose of preserving his good will and avoiding his malice, at different times, one hundred and twenty-six pounds, thirteen shillings and four pence.'<sup>3</sup>

The attitude of the convent towards Richard II

<sup>1</sup> He tells, for instance, how in 1384, in the midst of an argument with the Duke of Lancaster, he threw his shoes and cap through the window. In 1387 a judge made difficulties about signing a document presented to him. His son said, according to Walsingham, that his father was knocked down and kicked as he lay.

<sup>2</sup> *Trokelowe*, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, lxxii.

seems reasonable enough. The King, although he conferred more than one benefit upon St. Albans, does not appear to have cherished any affection for the Abbey. He was rather 'an especial favourer and promoter of Westminster,' whose interests he consistently supported in the disputes of the reign between the two houses concerning Parliamentary precedence. More difficult of explanation are the feelings St. Albans entertained towards John of Gaunt. A contemporary manuscript—called, on account of its bitterness, the 'Scandalous Chronicle'<sup>1</sup>—reveals the existence of strong hostility towards him, and repeatedly speaks of him in most abusive terms. In the early years of the fifteenth century, when the 'Scandalous Chronicle' was utilised for a new edition of the history of the time,<sup>2</sup> the worst of the slighting references to John of Gaunt were erased and the remarks generally toned down, while in the margin of the MSS. is inserted *cave quia offendiculum*. Plainly it was unwise to have such remarks about the father of the living King, and so the 'Scandalous Chronicle' was suppressed at the place where it was written.<sup>3</sup> Many motives may be attributed to the Abbey for its hostile attitude towards John of Gaunt. It had private grievances; the Abbot, for instance, had resented (though he feared to refuse) Lancaster's

<sup>1</sup> The chronicle has survived in two forms, *viz.*, Cotton MSS., Otho Cii (British Museum), and Bodleian MSS. 316 ff. 150-1, plus Harleian MSS. 6434. It has been printed in *Chronicon Angliæ* (Rolls Series).

<sup>2</sup> The Royal MSS. E. ix (B.M.)—the basis of Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*.

<sup>3</sup> See Maunde Thompson. Intro. to *Chronicon Angliæ* (Rolls Series).

demand for large supplies of timber for his castle at Hertford.<sup>1</sup> Another reason, doubtless, was the Duke's patronage of the 'Arch-heretic' Wycliffe, whom the Abbot and convent regarded with peculiar loathing. But the main cause of their hostility towards John of Gaunt sprang almost certainly from his political action. From 1377 to 1386 Lancaster was most unpopular with almost all classes.<sup>2</sup> The many misfortunes of these years—the French raids on the south coast, the failure of the English arms in France and Flanders, and even the unsuccessful government at home—were laid to his charge. From the *Historia Anglicana* it is evident that the monks shared this common attitude towards John of Gaunt. Again and again responsibility for failure is attributed to him, and he is branded as an incompetent general and a disloyal, scheming and unsuccessful politician. It is rather startling to find, however, that outwardly the most friendly relations were maintained between the Duke and the Abbey, while simultaneously such abuse was heaped upon him in its official chronicles. The Duke acted continuously as a patron of the Abbey, and conferred a long list of benefits upon it.<sup>3</sup> Evidently he was unaware of the secret sentiments of the House which he patronised so liberally.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Historia Anglicana I*, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup> The peasant armies in 1381 are said to have taken as their cry: 'We will have no King named John.'

<sup>3</sup> See Armitage Smith, *John of Gaunt*, pp. 169-171.

<sup>4</sup> This is sufficient proof—if proof were needed—of the 'independence' of English chroniclers, i.e., they did not merely write what they were told.

A growing movement towards reform and revival was thus the main trend of events at St. Albans during the fourteenth century. The persistent efforts of Maryns and the other short-lived abbots removed abuses and restored the discipline. The long abbacy of Thomas de la Mare was marked by able administration, and minute and unflagging attention to the monastery's interests. The Abbot shirked no contest to retain or regain lands, services or jurisdiction upon which the Abbey had just claims. His rule was necessarily marked by constant litigation with high and low, from which, in a great majority of cases, he emerged successful. This great labour, the details of which fill the chronicles of his abbacy, had the effect of restoring in some measure the Abbey's material prosperity. Finally, by his statesmanlike measures with regard to future vacancies he had done all in his power to ensure the permanence of his work of financial restoration.

The effect of lessening the pressure of outside circumstances and rendering more safe and easy the existence of the Abbey was to promote a mild revival which bore its best fruits in a new outburst of historical writing. The golden age of St. Albans' historical composition had been the early thirteenth century, and was associated with the names of Roger Wendover and Matthew Paris. Then it was that the St. Albans School grew famous. Its MSS. were frequently lent

Revival during  
de la Mare's  
Abbacy.

Historical  
Writing.

to other houses for the writing up of their own chronicles,<sup>1</sup> and when official information was required on a point of history it became usual to refer to the St. Albans chronicles.<sup>2</sup> With so long a tradition of annalistic composition<sup>3</sup> the Abbey developed a variety of script unique in England, and experts can identify with considerable certainty the products of the St. Albans scriptorium. The composition of history never actually ceased after the time of Matthew Paris. The tradition was maintained (though perhaps it languished somewhat) by the writings of Rishanger, Trokelowe and Blanford. At the close of the fourteenth century occurred the valuable revival under the guidance of Thomas of Walsingham. The years 1370 and 1420 mark roughly the limits within which it fell. The amount of work produced was considerable, and in quality was hardly inferior to that of the thirteenth century. From an historical point of view it is

<sup>1</sup> *Tout. Polit. Hist. of England, 1216-1377*, p. 452: 'The monks were jealously proud of their library to which almost every abbot found it expedient to contribute largely.' In 1326 there was great indignation when Abbot Richard gave or sold nearly forty volumes to Richard de Bury, a famous lover of books, to promote the interests of the abbot at Court. The incident was not forgotten, and after de Bury's death the books were bought back by the new abbot.

<sup>2</sup> *E.g. Higden's Polychronicon*, viii. 278.

<sup>3</sup> The Scriptorium had been founded by Abbot Paul, circa 1077. Owing to the ignorance of his own monks he was compelled to fill it with hired scribes. Towards the end of the twelfth century a 'historiographer' was appointed, and from that time the systematic compilation of annals may be taken to date. From the peculiar character of the St. Albans script Sir T. Duffus Hardy concluded that Matthew Paris learnt the art of writing from a foreign schoolmaster. See *Catalogue: Materials for History of Great Britain and Ireland III*, xxv, xxxiv, cxxiii.

probably more important, since by Walsingham's time other sources of chronicle writings were beginning to fail.<sup>1</sup>

In its revival under De la Mare, St. Albans was almost unique among the English abbeys; in no other case was there any movement comparable with it. Yet there is a grave danger of overrating the significance of De la Mare's abbacy. The monastic system cannot be said to have been reinvigorated nor primitive fervour restored. The revival was confined within narrow limits, and, on the whole, its fruits were small. It was, however, sufficient to blunt the edge of much of the contemporary criticism which in the fourteenth century was being applied to the monastic system. Chaucer, for example, in his Prologue, described for all time the typical monk of his day—

Unpopularity of  
Monasticism.

A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrye,  
an out-rydere, that lovede venerye;  
A manly man, to been an abbot able.  
Ful many a deyntee hors hadde he in stable:  
and, when he rood, men mighte his brydel here  
Ginglen in a whistling wynd as clere  
And eek as loude as doth the Chapel-belle,  
Ther as this lord was keper of the celle  
The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Beneit,  
By-cause that it was old and somdel streit,

<sup>1</sup> The same epoch left its impress upon the Abbey fabric. Much of it was rebuilt by Abbot Thomas, though unfortunately lapse of time and the restoration by Lord Grimthorpe's munificence have left little except the great Abbey gateway. Some stained glass, wall-paintings and a rood screen of this date still remain, and in Abbot Whethamstede's chapel there is a beautiful brass of De la Mare.

This ilke monk leet olde thinges pace  
And held after the newe world the space.

. . . therfor he was a fricasour aright  
Grehoundes he hadde, as swifte as fowel in flight.  
Of pricking and of hunting for the hare  
Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare

His head was balled, that shoon as any glas  
And eek his face, as he hadde been anoint.  
He was a lord ful fat and in good point

He was nat pale as a for-pyned goost  
A fat swan loved he best of any roost.<sup>1</sup>

But Chaucer's satire, once so true,<sup>2</sup> was a spent shot in De la Mare's time.

There was other contemporary criticism which was perhaps harder to meet. Langland looked forward with certainty to the time when the monastic system should be destroyed—'shall have knock of a king and incurable the wound.' The criticism of Wycliffe was more severe. His rejection of the Pope, with whose interests those of the exempt monasteries were bound up, his doctrine of evangelical poverty, and the practical proposal that the Government should disendow a delinquent church undermined the very foundations of monasticism. Wycliffe's position rested upon the double argument of the decay of the monastic life and the superiority of a life lived in the world. Of this contention St. Albans could refute only the half. The vicious handling which the reformer receives in its chronicles

<sup>1</sup> Chaucer: Prologue, &c. (Morris), lines 165-206.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. p. 12 ante.



almost suggests an anticipation of defeat, a tacit recognition of the weakness of the writer's position. Thomas Walsingham, in his *Historia Anglicana*, dubs him 'Wyk-believe' and 'disciple of anti-Christ'; speaks not of his opinions, but of his ravings (deliramenta), and unhesitatingly attributes to his inspiration such varied ills as the Peasants' Revolt and the profanation of the Sacrament by a Wiltshire knight. When he chronicles the death of 'that limb of Satan, idol of heretics, mirror of hypocrites and fabricator of lies—John Wycliffe,' it is only to repeat cruel gossip about his last hours. The life of Wycliffe, in fact, marks a fresh step in the growing unpopularity of the monastic system, and with a sure instinct St. Albans recognised the fact, and so far as it was able, dealt with him accordingly.

## II

# The Necessity for Dissolution



## II.

## The Necessity for Dissolution.

It remains for us, taking our stand at the year in which the Monastery was dissolved, to survey the period that has elapsed since the death of Thomas de la Mare. It was a time of stagnation, followed by rapid decline. At the end of the fifteenth century the Abbey was financially more embarrassed and morally even more depraved than in the first years of our period. Without attempting a defence either of the motives of Henry VIII or the methods of the Dissolution, no other conclusion is possible but that the abolition of St. Albans was both just and necessary. The Abbey had long since outlived its useful functions.

The necessity for the dissolution rests on a two-fold argument. There was first, the decay of religion, and even morality itself, within the cloister; and secondly, there was the decay of the manorial system, the economic basis of monasticism.

(A). *Economic History of the Abbey, 1300-1539.*

A great spiritual peer who as a mitred abbot took his place in Parliament among the magnates, the Abbot of St. Albans was a no less important personage in virtue of his huge landed possessions. Indeed, it has never been determined whether the right of such abbots to sit in the Upper House rested upon their spiritual dignity or their position as tenants-in-chief and great landlords. The Abbot of St. Albans exercised a wide seignorial jurisdiction over the Hundred of Cashio from early times, and later, over numerous manors in the eastern counties,<sup>1</sup> monuments to the piety of wealthy donors through the centuries. At the commencement of the fourteenth century the relations existing between the Abbey and its tenants were solely those of the manorial system, now fast decaying on all but monastic estates. The symmetry of this arrangement had been broken at an early date by the growth of the town at the very gates of the Abbey. The townsmen were ruled with the same despotic power as the country tenants, from whom they differed only in being more concentrated. As in the closely parallel case of Bury St. Edmunds, St. Albans was governed by a bailiff chosen by the Abbot

<sup>1</sup> *Viz.* Essex, Hertford, Bedford, Bucks, Cambridge, Kent, Middlesex, Yorkshire, Norfolk, Northampton, Berks, Lincoln, and in London.

and holding office during his pleasure; the townsmen were tried in the Abbot's court, and offenders incarcerated in the monastic prison. The Abbot secured the profits arising from his court—'the court of St. Albans under the ash-tree every three weeks'—and from fairs, as also the heavy tolls imposed upon all merchandise passing through the town. This antiquated tyranny contrasted ill with the wide municipal independence enjoyed by other towns.

Abbey  
and  
Town.

There were thus substantial reasons why the townsmen should free themselves at the first opportunity from the hated tutelage of the Abbey, though it must be confessed that their civic disabilities weighed less with them than the strict preservation of the Lord Abbot's warrens and fish ponds, the close fencing in of his estates, and a host of galling and antiquated signs of subjection, the chief of which was the obligation to full their cloth and grind their corn at the Abbot's mill.

It was typical of the monastery's conservatism that each succeeding abbot refused all concession. Discontent culminated in revolt. In 1274, taking as their pretext the matter of the Abbot's mill, the townsmen inaugurated a mild rebellion by setting up hand-mills in their own houses. Abbot Roger easily suppressed the rising, and an outbreak in 1314, provoked by the tactless, overbearing Hugh of Eversdon, collapsed even more ignominiously. A more serious disturbance, which broke out in 1327, was not finally crushed for seven years.

Taking advantage of the death of Abbot Hugh, and the temporary anarchy which followed the death of Edward II, the townsmen rose again and blockaded the Abbey. The affair was rendered the more serious by the existence among the monks of a party in league with the malcontents. The internal danger was averted by sending away the disaffected monks to distant cells, but Abbot William was compelled to give verbal consent to the demands of the townsmen for a charter embodying the right of choosing their own members of Parliament, liberty to use handmills, to fish in the Abbey waters, and to hunt its preserves, the privilege of executing writs without the interference of the bailiff of the liberty, and finally, the title of free burgesses.<sup>1</sup> By royal help the Abbot at length crushed the rising; the old subjection was once more firmly rivetted upon the townsmen, and the Abbey parlour was paved with their handmills as a token of their defeat and a warning for the future.<sup>2</sup> It is significant of the cruelty and selfishness of the Abbey that no sort of concession was made to the defeated townsmen. At this time, as subsequently, the Abbot showed himself incapable of appreciating the real trend of events. For a moment the Abbey had triumphed and all was well. Under the firm rule

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Abbatum II*, pp. 157-8.

<sup>2</sup> Another small outbreak in 1356 has escaped the notice of writers on St. Albans municipal history. See *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1354-1358, p. 493. It was perhaps as a consequence of this that the Convent secured a licence (1357) to crenellate the dwelling-place of the Abbey. *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1354-1358, p. 574.

of Thomas de la Mare there was no hope of success for an isolated rising, but the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 gave the tenants their opportunity, and the Abbey reaped the fruit of its foolish and short-sighted policy.

So much for the townsmen. The bulk of the Abbot's subjects, however, were country tenants, living on his various manors. Under the manorial system rural tenants lived in a state of political and economic subjection to their lord. Of such tenants a certain number were free labourers, but the large majority were bound to the lord by varying degrees of servile tenure. The serfs or villeins divided their time between cultivating their own patches of land and rendering labour services on that part of the manor which was cultivated by the lord or his bailiff for the supply of his own granaries. On many of the St. Albans manors a small money rent was also paid by the serf for his land.<sup>1</sup> By long tradition, though scarcely by law, the villein could not be evicted; on the other hand, he was bound to the soil, owed many feudal dues to his lord, and so many days' work per year on the lord's domain. A series of regulations of the close of the thirteenth century<sup>2</sup> discloses the harsh policy of St. Albans with regard to its villeins. Freemen were forbidden to buy villein lands; villeins were forbidden to sell

<sup>1</sup> *Whethamstede II*, p. 324-5; for such services the villein commonly received besides his food a small wage.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum I*, p. 453-455.



to anyone either lands or produce;<sup>1</sup> money payments and labour services were rigorously exacted, and the huge warrens in possession of the Abbey were strictly preserved. The effect of these regulations was to prevent the serf increasing his holding, and to maintain the distinction between free and unfree tenants. By this means alone could the Abbot combat the general tendency towards fusion of the two classes.<sup>2</sup>

While the Abbey was thus fighting to continue the old tyranny manumissions were becoming frequent on lay lands, and all over the country labour services were being given up in favour of money payments. Further, the practice of letting out lands in farms to rent-paying tenants was growing more general. By diminishing the population the Black Death (1349) hastened this process,<sup>3</sup> for landlords were compelled to offer high wages to secure

<sup>1</sup> An unusually severe regulation.

<sup>2</sup> It was highly desirable for the Abbot to maintain this distinction. In the King's courts the villein had no case against his lord save for bodily injury. In practice it appears that the Abbot of St. Albans could inflict even bodily injury with impunity. See, for instance, the case of Nicholas Tybson, who, having been stripped, thrashed and wounded by the Abbot's servants, brought an action for redress. The case was at once dismissed as a false appeal on the ground that Tybson was the born villein of the Abbot (*Gesta Abbatum III*, p. 39).

<sup>3</sup> T. W. Page: 'End of Villeinage in England' passim. See, too, Petit-Dutaillis' introduction to Réville, where the views of Stubbs and Thorold Rogers on this subject are exploded. The period 1349-1381, it is proved, was not marked (as they believed) by the reduction to serfdom of men emancipated before the Black Death, or the re-assertion on the part of landlords of labour services already commuted for money payments. On the contrary, the process of commutation (which had not advanced nearly so far by 1349 as Stubbs thought) proceeded at an increasing rate after 1349.

the cultivation of their demesnes, and they had perforce to bring in rent-paying tenants to till the lands of such of their villeins as had succumbed. Nor was the break-up of the old system retarded by the Statute of Labourers (1352). The Act, which provided that food prices as well as wages should remain fixed, was not so much a blow aimed at the poorer classes as an attempt to restore the state of affairs existing before 1349. The process of manumission continued; the numbers of freemen steadily increased, and, in spite of the Statute, wages and prices rose higher than ever before. This increase in the numbers of free labourers inspired those who were still in villeinage with the ambition to become themselves free and to cease rendering labour services which, as the token of their servile tenure, were regarded as degrading.

Such were the grievances of the peasants who in 1381 formed the backbone of the Revolt. The unwillingness to allow manumission which has been seen to exist towards the end of the thirteenth century at St. Albans, and the harsh provisions made to retain labour services, continued in full force.<sup>1</sup> In the case of one manor,<sup>2</sup> it is true, the two systems appear to have existed side by side about 1340, but

<sup>1</sup> No manumissions occur in the records until more than a generation after the revolt: evidently the old system remained unprosperous but intact at St. Albans in 1381.

<sup>2</sup> Réville: *Le Soulèvement des Travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381*, p. xxv. See also *Gesta Abbatum II*, p. 123 and *III*, pp. 39-41, *Whethamstede II*, pp. 324 and 333. At the cell of Tynemouth in 1378 there is no trace of commutation in the manor rolls; the old system still exists in its entirety; see Gibson: *History of Tynemouth*, Vol. II, Appendix, p. cxxi.

the rest of the evidence points to the retention in full of the old system both on the St. Albans estates and on the estates of its cells. Thus in 1381 the rural tenants of St. Albans were ready to join in the general revolt. Simultaneously the townsmen made a final attempt to win from the Abbot privileges identical with those demanded in 1327.

There is little reason to linger over the details of the Revolt. The townsmen rose in a body and set themselves to destroy all visible tokens of their subjection. The fences of the Abbot's

The Revolt  
of 1381.

woods were pulled down, his game was killed freely, and a show was made of dividing his domain into small individual holdings. Many houses were burnt, and the Abbey itself was mildly raided; but from first to last there was no wish to take life. The leader of the insurgents was William Grindcob, who appears to have been something of an enthusiast, and the most disinterested of all the leaders in this revolt. In compliance with his demands the Abbot was compelled to deliver up all the Abbey charters, and then to draw up a new charter granting to the townsmen (1) rights of pasturage on his common, (2) permission to use private handmills, (3) entire freedom to hunt and fish over the monastic estates, and (4) self-government by freely-elected officials. These were a repetition of the demands of 1327, except that in the interval the notion of self-government had become more clearly defined.

In spite of the townsmen's boast that they were

in alliance with the country tenants, the two bodies seem to have acted independently. Each had its own grievances to redress. Indeed, the country tenants were still further divided, but the Abbey was powerless to resist even such small bodies as the villeins of individual manors. The villeins on most of the Hertford manors—Tittenhanger, Northaw, Watford, Berkhamstead—marched to the Abbey and in a curiously restrained spirit secured charters satisfying their various local grievances. The tenants of the manor of Redburn, for example, extracted charters containing the abolition of serfdom, of villein services (in favour of money rents), and also, in common with the townsmen, the rights of the chase and of fishing. Those of Rickmansworth obtained all these privileges and the right besides of disposing freely of lands and movables; and so it was done by most other manors in the county.

But the privileges were secured only to be lost almost immediately. The King's officers arrived at St. Albans, no attempt at resistance was made, and the trouble subsided as quickly as it had arisen. The fifteen executions that followed (Grindcob being the most notable victim and dying finely) were, for the age, mild enough retaliation on the part of a panic-stricken government. As a matter of course, the Abbey was restored in its privileges, and the town subjected to it until the Dissolution.

In this way the Abbey was officially confirmed in its retention of an economic system which had be-

come both unjust and unprofitable. Yet economic change was inevitable, and received a grudging recognition. In 1424 the Abbot secured a papal bull<sup>1</sup> allowing the Abbey complete freedom to let out its lands in farms to rent-paying tenants—the system long since in vogue on lay estates. Later in the century manumissions of bondmen become more and more frequent. At first manumission is regarded as a privilege by the serfs, and the price paid for it is commonly entered in the margin of the document; but gradually examples grow more common; no more money entries occur, and it seems that the Abbot was only too happy 'to be rid of the presence of persons who had claims upon him as a landowner without any power on his part to exact a return to himself of commensurate advantage.'<sup>2</sup> Thus the old agricultural system slowly broke up, despite the monks who to the last retarded the transition to the new order.

Towards the town the Abbey remained to the last unbending, though not on account of any diminution in the resentment with which it was regarded by the inhabitants. In 1424 a large crowd appeared at the gate of the Abbey, armed with swords, to demand concessions similar to those of the extorted charter of 1381; but they were still cowed by the recollection of their late rising, and the affair came to nothing.<sup>3</sup> The last mention of open resistance

<sup>1</sup> *Amundesham I*, 163.    <sup>2</sup> *Whethamstede II*, Intro., p. xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> A few years earlier Abbot Heyworth had suppressed a similar rising at Barnet (*Whethamstede I*, 451-2).

occurs in 1455 when John Chertsey erected a private mill, and so withdrew corn from that of the Abbot. To such an act of daring he seems to have been inspired by his wife, a woman of spirit. Chertsey, however, was a timid creature; his heart failed him, and he was induced to make humble apology to the Abbot and to destroy the mill.

There can be little or no doubt that in the sixteenth century monastic lands were far behind lay estates in economic development. According to M. Savine, the agricultural revolution had scarcely affected the lands of the monks at the time of the Dissolution.<sup>1</sup> 'Arable land occupies . . . a very considerable part of the area that the monks kept in their own hands; it was very little, if at all, less than the area of the several pastures. As agriculturists the monks carried on a large, or at any rate, a fair-sized business. Now if the conversion of arable land into pasture land had become general under the first two Tudors, then in these thriving monastery farms it ought to be in much greater evidence than in the small homesteads of the peasants, who tilled the land for their own subsistence, and were fettered on all sides by communal regulations.' But that the revolution was in full swing on lay estates we know from More's *Utopia*, which was written as early as 1516.<sup>2</sup> Even at this date agriculture was being widely abandoned by lay farmers who were converting what was formerly

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> See *Utopia* (Clarendon Press Edition), pp. 13-20.

arable into pasture land, the growing woollen industry being found more profitable.<sup>1</sup>

To the last St. Albans strove to check economic development. At what was perhaps the great crisis in its history—the revolt of 1381—it had definitely

Summary. refused to adapt itself to altered conditions. By that refusal it ensured its economic decay, and finally its ruin. For while it was highly desirable that religion should flourish within the monastery, it was absolutely essential that such a huge establishment should rest on a sound economic basis if it was to continue. In the sixteenth century, or even earlier, this condition was no longer fulfilled. It is, however, scarcely a matter for which blame attaches to the House. The mediaeval ideal, which in one aspect was the monastic ideal, was stability, not progress. St. Albans was identical in its attitude with the other great monasteries; it was neither more nor less conservative. Its inability, rather than its refusal, to change or admit change was its condemnation. Such a splendid immobility has something of grandeur about it. At the same time the picture of a town deprived of its 'natural right of self-government,' and hindered accordingly in its prosperity, and of the mass of the Abbey's country tenants living unprosperously under an antiquated agricultural system, constitutes a crushing argument for the necessity of its dissolution.

<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate that the surveys of the Commissioners in 1535 for Hertford have perished. At the same time the condition of monastic estates was wonderfully similar, and St. Albans was probably no exception.

(B). *The Decay of the Monastic Spirit in the  
15th century.*

The task of interpreting the Abbey's history during the fifteenth century is difficult in the extreme. The confusion, the aimlessness which characterised political history are reflected in the records of St. Albans. Although the material is at least as plentiful as before, the impression conveyed by the facts is blurred and uncertain. With the death of De la Mare the lines of development become obscured. The fourteenth century had witnessed a steady upward movement culminating in the Abbacy of De la Mare. There is a temptation to see in the fifteenth century a consistent, growing degeneracy: the more as it is beyond question that by the year 1490 the Convent had sunk into deeper degradation than ever before. In one sense such a theory is true. The tide of economic decline and growing material decrepitude, stemmed by De la Mare's careful administration, proceeded unchecked after his death. Within the convent the decay of the monastic spirit was everywhere apparent. Living became inevitably more luxurious, and the religious life grew cold and formal.<sup>1</sup> Yet the reputation of

<sup>1</sup> On the other hand classical learning became more esteemed. It is impossible not to see in the florid verses of Whethamstede and in his prose (loaded with classical allusion and metaphor) an early appearance of the Renaissance spirit in England. Verse and prose are alike worthless, but show a striving after something better than mediaeval monastic writing. The tendency becomes



St. Albans was as great in 1460 as in the days of Abbot Thomas. Up to 1464 (the year in which Whethamstede died) no flagrant abuses appear to have invaded the cloister, nor was there any considerable slackening of the discipline. The problem, of which we can offer no adequate solution, is to account for the extraordinary rapid decay between 1464 and 1489, by which time the Abbey had become publicly scandalous. The history of these twenty-five years is quite obscure.

The first half of the century was singularly barren of incident. The best known Abbot of the time was John Whethamstede (circa 1420—1440), a famous scholar and churchman. Significantly enough he was one of those chosen to represent the English nation at the Councils of Pavia and Basle. He was popular with the convent, perhaps on account of his ardent orthodoxy. The singularly bitter attitude adopted towards Lollards in de la Mare's time was carefully maintained, and Whethamstede, by means of synods and commissions, extirpated heresy within the Liberty.<sup>1</sup> The Abbot was regarded by the monks

Whetham-  
stede's  
first Abbacy.

more marked in his work after his visit to Italy in 1423, where he was certainly influenced by the early Humanist movement.

<sup>1</sup> The town of St. Albans was apparently something of a Lollard centre. Sir John Oldcastle lay in hiding there, and when in 1414 William Murlee (one of his followers) was hanged and burnt, the convent firmly believed that he had planned to put them every one to death (Walsingham: *Hist. Angl. II*, 298-299). See, too, the account of the proceedings at the Synod held by Whethamstede in 1429 (*Amundesham I*, 222-3): for commission to put down heresy (*Amundesham II*, 23). The Abbot's bitterness extended to any departure from orthodoxy, and Pecoock was an object of his special dislike.

as having conferred notable benefits upon them; the chief of these were his acquisition of the Priory of Pembroke (1439), his generosity to the Abbey's students at Oxford and certain financial innovations.<sup>1</sup> To-day, as one digs him out of the very inferior chronicle of the time, he seems rather wanting in purpose, and somewhat vain and foolish; nevertheless, he certainly had the confidence of the convent, who, after his voluntary retirement for some years insisted upon re-electing him Abbot in 1452. The reason was probably that he was old, experienced, and cautious. At the time these qualities were invaluable; the Abbey was acquiring a political significance, and skilful guidance was necessary to avoid disaster amid the intrigues of Henry VI's reign, which were threatening to culminate in Civil War. The second abbacy of Whethamstede, within which fell the Wars of the Roses, was therefore an anxious and, as it proved, disastrous time for the monks.

It was maintained by Hallam that the sympathies of Abbot Whethamstede were wholly Lancastrian during the Wars of the Roses. Riley, after a more careful study, affirmed that the reverse was the case,<sup>2</sup> and without doubt he was nearer the mark

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* He instituted and endowed 'a common chest,' to which resort was to be made only at times of great financial necessity. He also created the office of 'Master of the Works,' to whom he assigned regular funds with which the Master was to keep the Abbey buildings in repair and put up new structures when required.

<sup>2</sup> Riley, for instance, thought it probable that Whethamstede was the Duke of Gloucester's political adviser, and that his resignation of the abbacy in 1440 was due to the waning of 'Good Duke

than Hallam. The great affection consistently displayed for Humphrey Duke of Gloucester (a lavish patron of the Abbey), and the attempt in the chronicle to clear his memory, in themselves indicate with which party the Abbot's sympathies lay. Further proof is supplied by florid verses, strongly Yorkist in tone, from the Abbot's own hand; and finally, there is the fact that the Abbey was pillaged by the Lancastrian troops in 1461. But the question is of the slightest importance.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, the Abbey enjoyed the full favour of Henry VI. as much as of Edward IV; it was only in the actual fighting that its political proclivities affected its fortunes.

Henry VI was a frequent visitor at St. Albans, and bestowed, among many other marks of his favour, a notable extension of the franchise. The seignorial jurisdiction of the Abbot over the Hundred of Cashio, which was based on a charter of Henry II, had gradually been diminished by the encroachments of neighbouring Lords. In 1440 the King granted a new interpretation of the words of Henry II's Charter, by which the Abbot's

Humphrey's' popularity before the rising star of Beaufort. 'When . . . the contending rivals had been alike removed by the impartial hand of death, we find him emerging from his comparatively obscure position as a pensioned monk of the Abbey, and on the first opportunity attaining the Abbacy once more' (*Amundesham II*, liv).

<sup>1</sup> 'His (Whethamstede's) counsels,' says Riley, 'seem to have been sought with equal eagerness by the two great heads of the antagonistic parties of the politics of the times, the intriguing and ambitious Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, and his . . . nephew, the Duke of Gloucester' (*Amundesham I*, xv).

authority was restored to its full limit, if not rendered greater than ever before.<sup>1</sup> In order to obtain such a grant it is obvious that the Abbot must have been in high favour with Henry VI, who indeed is always mentioned in these chronicles in terms of respect.

Nevertheless, when in 1455 the Yorkist party triumphed at the first battle of St. Albans, only the fact that the direction of the Abbey's sympathies was well known can have saved it from being plundered.<sup>2</sup>

The continual fighting in its neighbourhood reduced the Abbey to dire straits, and the next six years were among the darkest in its history. Its troubles culminated in the disaster of 1461, when, after a Lancastrian victory at the second battle of St. Albans, the Northern troops plundered the Abbey and horribly ravaged the surrounding country. The Queen even condescended to rob the Abbey of its most precious jewels and treasures.<sup>3</sup> The result was sheer famine; the convent were dispersed, and the Abbot retired to his native town. Thus for the only time in its history the continuity of conventual life at St. Albans was broken. The final triumph of Edward IV in the same year ensured such amelioration of the

Second  
Battle  
of St.  
Albans.

<sup>1</sup> *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1436-1441, p. 422.

<sup>2</sup> The King is found nevertheless in 1549 spending Easter at the Abbey and lavishing gifts upon the Abbot.

<sup>3</sup> *Whethamstede I*, 396. The St. Albans chronicles make a valuable contribution to political history for the years 1450-1461. For this the coincidence of two decisive battles being fought at St. Albans is responsible.

Abbey's fortunes as was possible. The battle had taken place in February, and by November the convent had re-assembled, to enter upon the last stage of its existence with a fresh grant of privileges. A complicated jurisdiction, which far exceeded the grant of 1440, was bestowed upon the Abbey.<sup>1</sup>

The unsoundness of the Abbey's economic practice and the consequent increasing financial embarrassment were at the root of all its troubles in the fifteenth century. Its poverty weakened its independence, and was at once the cause of the decline of its hospitality and the reason for its growing obsequiousness toward the great. The bishops especially were quick to realise the weakness of the Abbey.<sup>2</sup> Always jealous of exempt houses, they exhibited in the fifteenth century an unusually bitter hostility towards St. Albans. In 1399, Henry Bishop of Lincoln had formally notified the Abbot that he claimed no jurisdiction over the Abbey<sup>3</sup>; this was nothing more than an acknowledgment of an old and undoubted privilege pertaining to St. Albans as an exempt monastery. Only twenty years later, at the Council of Pavia, a new Bishop of Lincoln claimed full jurisdiction over St. Albans, and called for the

<sup>1</sup> *Newcome*, p. 374. Clutterbuck: *History and Antiquities of the County of Hertford I*, Appendix I, pp. 527-46, for a copy of Edward IV's charter.

<sup>2</sup> For the growth of Episcopal hatred, see *Amundesham I*, p. 73-82, 142-195, and 300-408.

<sup>3</sup> *Gesta Abbatum III*, p. 472.

reform of exempt houses. This was followed by the revival of the Archbishop of Canterbury's claims to jurisdiction, but these the Abbot was still strong enough to resist. A few years later a dispute concerning the Bishop of Norwich's jurisdiction over the Cell of Binham broadened out into an organised attack by the English bishops upon the privileges of St. Albans. This was evidently regarded as a test case. Exactly how the struggle ended is not recorded, but probably it left matters in the old uncertain condition. These attempts mark a fresh stage in the growing unpopularity of the Abbey, and it is worthy of notice that the increasing hatred towards exempt houses on the part of the bishops might well of itself have led to the fall of the monastic system in England. As it was, the support of the bishops made it more easy for Henry VIII to carry through the Dissolution.

Even during the fourteenth century there had been a natural and almost inevitable growth of luxury in the monastic life: in the course of the fifteenth

Decay of the  
Monastic Spirit  
(1396 to 1464).

it progressed by leaps and bounds. A host of insignificant facts illustrate the tendency. The food of the novices was rendered more sumptuous on the plea that the youths had not such strong constitutions as their fathers. Papal Bulls were secured remitting fasts, and the allowance of spices was doubled. As with the convent, so was it with the Abbots themselves. William Heyworth (1401—1420), who was considered so excellent a cleric as to be raised to episcopal

dignity as Bishop of Lichfield, spent large sums of money on the completion of a splendid Abbot's mansion at Tittenhanger, contrary, needless to say, to all Benedictine precedent. A parallel tendency was a perceptible decline of zeal and interest in the religious life. In 1428, for instance, owing (as the Abbot confessed) to its uselessness, the ancient cell of Beaulieu<sup>1</sup> was abandoned, and twenty years later the Priory of Wymondham, as the result of a trifling dispute broke away from the mother house, and was erected into an Abbey. The tendency is further illustrated by the Constitutions published by Whet-hamstede after a formal visitation of the convent.<sup>2</sup> No gross abuses were discovered, but a certain laziness and indifference towards religious services and observance was found to have pervaded the convent. It was much the same in the cells which the Abbot visited a little later. It appeared that the monks were lazy, and slept too long; just correction for offences had not always been inflicted; services were apt to be carried out indifferently, and sometimes to be omitted altogether. It was slothfulness, not positive vice, that had to be fought against. A subtle illustration of this is unconsciously supplied by the chronicler. The Abbot had promulgated a set of rigorous constitutions which went to the root of the trouble more than was usual; but the convent murmured, refused to accept them, and finally carried their will against the Abbot; as for the Constitutions they became a dead letter.

<sup>1</sup> *Amundesham I*, 29, 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Amundesham I*, 101.

When Whethamstede was re-elected in 1452<sup>1</sup> he was informed that three great defects existed in the Monastery. Scarcely one in the Abbey, it appeared, could be found competent to teach grammar; there were hardly any students from St. Albans at Gloucester Hall; and it was only with difficulty that persons could be found prepared to undertake the burden of preaching.

These facts point to a rapid raising of the standard of comfort, to growing indifference, and a sad decay of the monastic spirit. But in view of the dreadful condition of the convent in 1490 it is important to observe that they give us no reason to suppose the existence of immorality in the cloister or even of any serious relaxation of the discipline.

Abbot Whethamstede's successor was a certain William Albon (1464—1476), 'who,' says the chronicler, 'followed diligently in the footsteps of his predecessor. During all the time he was Abbot he strove after the good of his Church in things temporal and spiritual.'<sup>2</sup> His reign and that of William Wallingford (1476—?1490) carry us to the year 1490, when a letter of Cardinal Morton reveals the monastery in a state of utter degradation. The decay must be placed entirely between the years 1476 and 1490, and it is impossible to  
 Abbot Wallingford. account for its rapidity. Perhaps it was due to the bad influence of William Wallingford, but the whole matter is not a little mysterious. In 1451 Wallingford is found holding the

<sup>1</sup> *Whethamstede I*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Whethamstede I*, p. 475.



joint offices of Archdeacon, Cellarer, Bursar, Forester and Sub-Cellarer of the Abbey, and in some of these offices he was continued during Whethamstede's second abbacy (1452—1464). During this same period he was to all intents and purposes convicted of having laid hands upon the moneys of the previous Abbot. The matter is dealt with at length in the chronicle, and in most violent terms Wallingford is accused again and again of habitual perjury.<sup>1</sup> Yet on the death of Whethamstede he was elected prior, and in 1476 Abbot.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in an account of *The Lives and Benefactions of the Later Abbots*<sup>3</sup> he is spoken of in terms of the most extravagant praise. On the whole the general impression of this difficult character derived from the Chronicle is that of a bad man but a vigorous Abbot, who, however evil his influence upon the convent, nevertheless rendered it important services. The monks, perhaps, forgot his vices in their admiration of what was to them the first of virtues—his strenuous efforts to preserve the independence of the house. For it was during his rule that the most determined, and, as it proved, successful attacks were made upon the Abbey's highly-prized exemption from archiepiscopal visitation.

<sup>1</sup> *Whethamstede I*, XV.

<sup>2</sup> It is a curious circumstance that the folio containing the account of his election has been torn out of the register.

<sup>3</sup> MS. Cotton: *Nero D.VII* (British Museum), folios 25A-48A. *Whethamstede I*, 451. A different MS. from that of his Register (*vis.* MS. Arundel III, College of Arms), which contains the charges against him.

In the register of Wallingford's abbacy there is only one indication of the bad turn conventual life was taking. This is the record of an enormous traffic in patronage, a new and bad feature at St. Albans, confined for the most part to Wallingford's abbacy.<sup>1</sup>

Economically bankrupt, the Monastery was reduced at last to bartering the livings in its gift, and even to trafficking in the monastic offices.<sup>2</sup> In the register of William Wallingford there is a long list of entries noting the gift by the Abbot to all sorts of important persons of the right to present to the next vacancy in many of the Abbey's livings. These transactions, whether accompanied by a money consideration or simply to gain the support and protection of persons of high rank, indicate a willingness on the part of the Abbot to trifle with some of his most sacred responsibilities. More sinister still are the frequent changes of the vicars in the various livings. At Elstree, for example, there were as many as nine rectors in sixteen years; at Shephale five occur in six years.<sup>3</sup>

The case of St. Albans may have been exceptional. In the general decay of English monasticism the Abbey incurred an unenviable notoriety, which indeed still clings to it. But that the English monas-

<sup>1</sup> There are a few instances, however, during Albon's rule.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Office of Seneschal of the Liberty bestowed upon several prominent political figures between 1474 and 1482 (see *Whethamstede II*, xxx).

<sup>3</sup> *Whethamstede II*, xxxii. Riley has examined such cases in detail. It appears that even his right of presentation of a Prior to the Cell of Tynemouth was alienated by Wallingford.

teries as a body were in a depraved condition was fully realised by the heads of Church and State. In 1490 Archbishop Morton applied and received from Innocent VIII the special powers necessary for a visitation of Cluniac, Cistercian and Premonstratensian Houses with foreign heads.<sup>1</sup> Armed with the Papal commission Morton wrote letters to the heads of the various monasteries, in which he imperatively called upon them to reform.

In a letter which he addressed to the Abbot, Morton wrote<sup>2</sup>: 'It has come to our ears, being at once publicly notorious and brought before us on the testimony of many witnesses worthy of credit, that you the Abbot aforementioned have been of long time noted and diffamed, and do yet continue so noted, of simony, of usury, of dilapidation and waste of goods, revenues and possessions of the said monastery and of certain other enormous crimes and excesses hereafter written . . . You and certain of your fellow monks and brethren . . . have relaxed the measure and form of religious life; you have

<sup>1</sup> E.H.R. xxiv. 319-321: the Bull was promulgated in March, 1490. Mr. James Gairdner believes the curious omission in the Bull of any mention of Benedictine Houses due to the fact that there were so few exempt in England. More probably, I think, the omission was due to the Pope's unwillingness to reverse a brief he had issued less than two months previously. In February, 1490, at the solicitation of Abbot Wallingford, Innocent VIII had addressed a brief to the Archbishop bidding him defend St. Albans against all attacks as an exempt House. Evidently Wallingford had an inkling of the impending reform and strove to anticipate Morton.

<sup>2</sup> *Wilkins Concilia III*, p. 632; the translation is from Froude.

laid aside the pleasant yoke of contemplation and all regular observances, hospitality, alms<sup>1</sup> . . . and the ancient rule of your order is deserted . . . you have dilapidated the common property; you have made away with the jewels and the woods to the value of 8,000 marks or more.' The letter goes on to specify 'the enormous crimes and excesses' in a most complete manner; names and details are given in every case, and the Abbot and Thomas Sudbury, a monk, are accused of the most disgusting offences. The nunneries of Prez and Sopwell—cells of the Abbey—are stated to be little better than brothels. 'The brethren of the Abbey, some of whom, as it is reported, are given over to all the evil things of the world, neglect the service of God altogether. They live with harlots and mistresses publicly and continuously within the precincts of the monastery and without.'

The Archbishop adds that he had warned the Abbot to cure these abuses before securing the papal commission. The Abbot and the Prioresses of Prez and Sopwell are strictly enjoined to correct these enormities within thirty days, and the Priors of the more distant cells within sixty days. Unless they comply the Archbishop himself will be compelled to make a personal visitation and to carry out the necessary reforms.

<sup>1</sup> In 1484 Wallingford formally allowed Thomas Hethnes, keeper of the George Inn, to have a chapel for the celebration of the Mass by the Chaplains of 'such great men and nobles and others as should be lodging at this hostelry' (*Whethamstede II*, xxxiii; also p. 269), a clear indication of the decline of the one-time famous hospitality.

The Abbot, making no attempt to answer the charges, instantly appealed to the Pope against the authority of the Archbishop to hold a visitation.<sup>1</sup> The Pope consented to prohibit any action on Morton's part pending the hearing of the appeal by two papal chaplains. Abbot Wallingford must now have won his case but for the intervention of Henry VII. The combined pleadings of King and Archbishop prevailed with the Pope. On July 30th, 1490, Innocent VIII, without pronouncing on the question of exemption, granted special faculties to the Archbishop for this particular visitation notwithstanding all rights and privileges. And there can be little doubt but that the visitation was in due course carried out.<sup>2</sup> Whether all these charges were substantiated we do not know; but it is impossible to doubt that the bulk of them was true. St. Albans was too large, too famous a house, and too near London, for Morton to have been misled by idle rumour. The outcome of Morton's letter is unrecorded; probably the reforms were effected, though the Abbot, it would appear, was not deposed.

<sup>1</sup> The history of these transactions is taken from an article by Mr. Gairdner (E.H.R. xxiv. 319-321) based upon Abbot Gasquet's researches in the Papal archives.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Gairdner gives it as his opinion that the visitation was not carried out (see *Lollardy and the Reformation*, Vol. 1, pp. 269-272, Vol. III, p. xxxi). He bases his view on a passage in the St. Albans obit book (*Whethamstede I*, p. 478), recording a victory of Wallingford over the Archbishop. This passage, it appears from what follows, was written not later than 1484 (see *Whethamstede I*, p. 479), the convent solemnly affixing its seal to the narrative under the date 'anno domini millesimo quadringentesimo octogesimo quarto, die, videlicet, mensis Augusti octava.' Probably therefore the account refers to an earlier and unsuccessful attempt of the Archbishop to carry out a visitation (see Appendix).

It is in the Abbey's favour that no further trace of immorality is to be found in the history of the fifty years of life which lay before it.

It seems strange that the Abbey should have gone on after this shock without a suspicion of coming destruction. Such, however, was the case; and even

Events  
1489—1539.

Henry VII is found to endow the monastery in return for certain prayers for his soul to be rendered 'for ever and ever.' As late as 1530, indeed, there is mention of a grant to the Abbey of an annual fair. Of these last years a wealth of detail has survived, albeit in unlikely places. In 1511 the House had fallen into the King's debt; in 1515 Abbot Ramrygge, Wallingford's successor, refused to pay Peter Pence,<sup>1</sup> and in 1519 the Prior of Rochester was appointed coadjutor to the old Abbot.<sup>2</sup> Monastic affairs, it appears, were in complete disorder, and a large debt (4,000 marks) had been accumulated. In the same year the Prior of Tynemouth was freed from the jurisdiction of St. Albans,<sup>3</sup> a measure which illustrates the enfeebled condition of the Abbey.

The first hint of the final catastrophe occurred upon the death of Ramrygge in 1521. By a dispensation of Adrian VI, Wolsey was commended to the vacant abbacy,<sup>4</sup> the convent apparently

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers I*, No. 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1519, No. 487.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1519, No. 510.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1521, No. 1843.

allowing this infringement of its rights without protest. Perhaps, as Abbot Gasquet has said, the motive for this action was in part a desire to reward the cardinal for secular services. If so, it was a poor compliment to Wolsey to receive an abbey so loaded with debt as to be unable to pay its contribution to Convocation.<sup>1</sup> It is far more likely that he secured it, knowing that the House was bankrupt, and that strong measures were required to save it.<sup>2</sup>

The death of Wolsey necessitated a fresh election. No interference was attempted by Henry VIII, who confirmed the convent's choice in the person of Robert Catton. It was during his abbacy the Visitation of the monasteries was carried out.

Owing to the disappearance of the Hertfordshire surveys, St. Albans can furnish no certain evidence upon the numerous questions arising out of the

Dissolution.<sup>3</sup> Such facts as we have tend  
 Social In-  
 fluence of  
 the Abbey. to confirm the conclusions of M. Savine.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt, for example, that the social sympathies of the Abbey were pre-eminently aristocratic. Most of the monks do not themselves

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1523, No. 3239.

<sup>2</sup> Gasquet: *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, p. 27; the appropriation of the revenues of Prez and Tenby to his colleges at Oxford and Ipswich is natural; the revenues of the suppressed houses were too small to have been of any real assistance to St. Albans.

<sup>3</sup> Savine: *English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution*, p. 24 (Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History). The surveys of six counties are missing from *Valor Ecclesiasticus*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 263-267. Cf. His conclusion that the monks maintained a population not more than four times their own number. Abbot Gasquet had stated it to be at least ten times as great. Cf., too, Hibbert's *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, p. 210.

appear to have come from the lower strata of society. The Abbey bestowed its corrodies for the most part upon persons of the well-to-do classes. Moreover, a close connection existed between the Abbey and the neighbouring gentry, whose sons it had long been wont to board and educate. On members of the same class many of the lay offices of the monastery were conferred.<sup>1</sup> Even the apparently democratic practice of alms-giving was a perfunctory duty, a mere compliance with the wishes of donors who had in times past liberally endowed the Abbey. At a wealthy House like St. Albans, which relied so completely on the patronage of the great, it could scarcely have been otherwise.

In fact, evidence compels us to reduce the generally accepted estimates of the Abbey's social and economic importance. Such social services as it did render were chiefly on the side of hospitality and education. Of these, hospitality<sup>2</sup>—which had always been at least as aristocratic as otherwise—had seriously diminished by the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, after the Dissolution this common shelter for rich and poor must have been deeply regretted.<sup>4</sup>

The Abbey perhaps did its best work in the sphere

<sup>1</sup> E.g. *Whethamstede II*, xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Morton's letter to the Abbot, 1490. *Whethamstede II*, xxxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Morton's letter to the Abbot, 1485 (*Whethamstede II*, xxxiii).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Robert Aske's remarks in 1536 with regard to the blessings the abbey conferred upon the 'poor commons' (Gasquet's *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, p. 225).



of education; from first to last during our period particular care was expended upon the education of the monks, within the monastery and at the University. The Abbey deserves still greater credit for creating and maintaining St. Albans Grammar School. The first mention of the School occurs in 1100, when it was ruled by a secular head master and received fees from scholars. In the thirteenth century arose the practice of boarding within the monastery and teaching the sons of neighbouring lords; for the future no fees were to be received from the sixteen poorest scholars; the master was given the rare privilege of excommunicating the disobedient, and allowed, after an examination, to confer degrees upon the scholars after the manner of the Universities. All illicit or adulterine schools were to be rooted out of the Liberty. Towards the end of the century the Abbey began to board and educate a number of poor scholars; this custom, as a charity, fell to the Almoner, who soon devolved his duties upon a serjeant, who, like the schoolmaster, was not a monk. The school was thus in no sense 'an avenue to the monastery'; on the contrary, there was an entire separation of the school from the Abbey. It was, perhaps, for this reason that the institution flourished (when the Abbey itself was in decay<sup>1</sup> till, by a wide

<sup>1</sup> The printing press generally said to have existed within the Abbey was probably set up in the town by an anonymous master of the Grammar School about 1480. See an elaborate article in the *Victoria History of English Counties* (Hertford), Vol. II, pp. 47-56.

interpretation of terms, it was dissolved in 1539 as a part of the Abbey. This continuous interest in secular education for four centuries was perhaps the best word that could be said for the Abbey at the Dissolution.<sup>1</sup>

The Visitation of the monasteries was carried out by Cromwell, as Vicar-General, in 1535.<sup>2</sup> John ap Rice, the commissioner at St. Albans, wrote to his master: 'At St. Albans we found little although there was much to be found.'<sup>3</sup> The commissioner spoke the simple truth if it was disorder and faction to which he referred. In the same year the prior and about half of the monks petitioned Sir Francis Brian<sup>4</sup> to save them from their own Abbot, who had contracted large debts, had sold the woods belonging to the convent, and had compelled the convent to affix their seal to transactions of which they disapproved, threatening to expel anyone who should inform against him. Within a year there was civil war within the Abbey, and the same section of the convent wrote a second desperate appeal

<sup>1</sup> The school was refounded 1549; probably it never ceased actually to exist.

<sup>2</sup> Already in 1528 Wolsey had suppressed a number of the smaller monasteries, among them the nunnery of St. Mary de Prez (on the ground that the inmates did not preserve good discipline) and the cell of Pembroke.

<sup>3</sup> Adding 'It were well to suppress the nunnery of Sopwell as you may see by the comperts' (*Letters and Papers*, 1535, No. 661). The state of affairs would thus really seem to have been worse in the smaller houses than at St. Albans; but of Binham, on the other hand, there is direct evidence that, except that its numbers had grown smaller, it was in good condition (*Letters and Papers*, 1534, No. 574).

<sup>4</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1535, No. 1155.

to Sir Brian, saying that the Abbot would surely take vengeance upon them unless Sir Brian secured the appointment of a coadjutor.<sup>1</sup> 'Our monastery is in much decay and misery,' they confess sadly, and their words obtain confirmation from another extraordinary incident of that year, the trial of the third Prior for making various treasonable remarks, as for example, that the King intended to leave only four churches in England. Other monks of the Abbey had informed against him to 'avoid guilty participation.' The result was indecisive, but the whole matter is an indication of the complete demoralisation of the convent.<sup>2</sup>

By this time it was becoming known to the world that St. Albans must fall.<sup>3</sup> Robert Catton was deprived of the Abbacy in the early days of 1538. The convent was induced to renounce its right to elect a successor in favour of Thomas Cromwell, who appointed a certain Richard Boreman (or Stevynache) to the vacancy. According to Abbot Gasquet, Boreman was chosen simply to effect a voluntary surrender of the Abbey, and it certainly is true that in December, 1537, Cromwell's commissioners had tried in vain to induce Catton to resign the Abbey into their hands. He had declared himself ready, they wrote to Cromwell, 'to beg his bread all the days of his life rather than surrender, although by the confession of the Abbot himself

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1536, No. 642.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1536, No. 354.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 1537, No. 1209.

there is just cause of deprivation, not only for breaking the King's injunctions, but also for the manifest dilapidation, making of shifts, negligent administration, and sundry other causes.<sup>1</sup> It seems plain, in fact, that Catton's deprivation was in large part due to his own misdeeds,<sup>2</sup> a conclusion which is supported by the fact that Boreman himself was soon involved in difficulties with the Government which appointed him. He was sent for a time to gaol, which is difficult of explanation on the assumption that he was a Government tool appointed only to effect a quiet surrender. Eventually the Act of Surrender was signed on December 5th, 1539. Some forty signatures were appended, indicating a decrease of one-third in the normal numbers of the convent.<sup>3</sup> The net monastic income was estimated at £2,102, the fourth highest in the Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> It only remained to divide the spoils, which was done with astonishing quickness. By the year 1544 every acre of the St. Albans estates was disposed of. The Abbey buildings were acquired by the townsmen (and so saved from destruction) at a cost of £400.

The history of St. Albans is sufficient proof that

<sup>1</sup> *Monasticon II*, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> From one of his letters to Cromwell it would appear that as early as January, 1536, Catton felt his position insecure owing to the complaints of his own monks. 'Trusts greatly to Cromwell his position here being so intrikyd with extreme penury . . . and most of all encumbered with an uncourteous flock of brethren' (*Letters and Papers*, 1536, No. 152).

<sup>3</sup> The average decline in numbers has been calculated by Savine as one-fifth; so the proportion at St. Albans was high.

<sup>4</sup> The three greater were: Canterbury (£2,423); Westminster (£2,409); and Glastonbury (£3,311) (Savine Appendix, p. 270-288).

the time is past when we can rest content with generalisations about monasticism in the later Middle Ages. During the fourteenth century the trend of events in the Abbey was entirely contrary to that in most English Houses. While they decayed, St. Albans revived. A century later it is probable that the monasteries as a whole were in a far less degraded condition than St. Albans. Perhaps similarly startling differences will be revealed when the history of other abbeys has been worked out in detail. Many loose generalisations on the subject of the monasteries are due to the assumption that decay or reform proceeded at an equal pace in different abbeys. Froude, for example, sought to trace a growing corruption of monasticism from Norman times. His view was founded simply on his study of St. Albans records, and even here his account was worthless. The decadence, the immorality of which he spoke was largely confined to the early years of the fourteenth century, and the Abbacy of William Wallingford (1476—1490). To see in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a consistent, uniform process of decay is largely to misunderstand St. Albans' history.

It is true, nevertheless, that the best days of the Abbey were already past at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The evolution of modern from mediaeval society, which was effected during our period, was fatal to monasticism. The country grew more and more out of sympathy with the monasteries; amid uncongenial surroundings, St. Albans,

in common with other abbeys, became increasingly unpopular. By its unintelligent conservatism St. Albans alienated the sympathies of section after section of the community, until at the Dissolution it stood well-nigh in isolation. Recent defence of the monastic system has failed as completely as Froude's indictment. In the Dissolution of St. Albans we may not, like Froude, 'see the workings of the ineffable Being,' but we are no less unable to regret it, to look upon it as a great social calamity.

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# APPENDIX





## Appendix :

*See Note 2, p. 60.*

The account of William Wallingford's abbacy in the *Lives and Benefactions*<sup>1</sup> . . . ' is inconsistent with all that is known of him from other sources. The Abbot is described in a tone of excessive admiration which cannot be reconciled with the account of him supplied by Morton's letter. In the *Lives and Benefactions* . . . , for instance, he is stated to have left the Monastery entirely free of debt. This is not only intrinsically improbable, but is directly contradicted by Morton's statement. Again, it is difficult to imagine any adequate reason why the convent should solemnly fix its seal as a testimony to the proof of the narrative, especially when the Abbot was, as it seems, still living. Indeed, considered apart from other evidence, this last passage, without explicitly stating it, distinctly implies that Wallingford did die in 1484. Doubtless the error of Newcome (followed by the editors of Dugdale's *Monasticon*), who states that Wallingford died in 1484, is to be explained in this way.

It may be well, therefore, to repeat that the folio of the Register containing the account of Walling-

<sup>1</sup> *Whethamstede I*, p. 475-479.

ford's election is missing, having been apparently torn from the MS.; that he had been convicted of appropriating Abbot Stoke's treasure in 1451; that in the 'Register of John Whethamstede' he is continually mentioned in terms of extreme disgust; and finally, that the Register of his own abbacy breaks off abruptly the year before Morton's Commission.

In view of these facts we must regard the story of his abbacy, as told in the *Lives and Benefactions*, with extreme mistrust. It is not improbable that this account was written by a convent fearful of offending a tyrannical Abbot; it is by no means impossible that the Abbot himself caused the narrative to be written as an answer to the charges contained in Morton's letter.

LIST OF THE ABBOTS OF ST. ALBAN'S  
FROM 1291 TO 1539.

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John de Berkhamstede	-	-	1291—1302.
John de Maryns	-	-	1302—1308.
Hugh de Eversdon	-	-	1308—1326.
Richard de Wallingford	-	-	1326—1335.
Michael de Mentmore	-	-	1335—1349.
Thomas de la Mare	-	-	1349—1396.
John Moote	-	-	1396—1401.
William Heyworth	-	-	1401—1420.
John Whethamstede	-	-	1420—1440.
John Stoke	-	-	1440—1452.
John Whethamstede (2)	-	-	1452—1464.
William Albon	-	-	1464—1476.
William Wallingford	-	-	1476—1491 (?).
John Ramrygge	-	-	1492—1521.
Thomas Wolsey	-	-	1521—1530.
Robert Catton	-	-	1530—1538.
Richard Boreman (Stevynache)			1538—1539.

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Among these authorities the material is derived primarily from *Gesta Abbatum*, Vols II and III, *Annals of John Amundesham*, and *Register of John Whethamstede*, 1422—1488. Where no authority is given for a statement it is from one of these volumes. Reference to these for every fact cited would have unduly encumbered the essay with notes.

