

## THE BLACK DEATH AT ST. EDMUND'S ABBEY

By CARSON RITCHIE, M.A., PH.D.

As the devastation of Bury St. Edmunds Abbey by plague in the great sickness of 1348 has virtually escaped notice by historians, apart from the very brief notice in the 'Calendar of Papal Registers,'<sup>1</sup> it is gratifying to record the discovery of a Papal Bull of Clement VI, dated 19 January 1351, which grants permission to Abbot William de Bernham to have 10 monks, who were under the statutory age of 25, ordained as priests.

The bull in question has been preserved rather oddly; it is now the cover of one of the Elizabethan court books of the Archdeaconry of St. Albans, which are now in Hertford County Record Office.<sup>2</sup> Both 'bulla' and cord have gone, and the writing has been turned inwards. As the bull is still sewn to the court book, there are words in it which can only be read with great difficulty. Moreover in being put on to the court book, the left hand margin of the bull has been clipped, and some words have been wholly or partly cut away, while others have become so rubbed as to be illegible, even under the ultra-violet lamp. In these circumstances the writer was fortunate in securing the collation of the text of the document with that of Reg. Vat. 201, folio 57, recto and verso, in the *Archivio Vaticano*. Monsignor Martino Giusti, Prefect of the *Archivio* was good enough to perform this task, and the author would also like to thank Cardinal Mercati for his help in this connection. It must be emphasised that the text of the Bull is not identical with that enrolled in the Register.

The circumstance of such a document having travelled to St. Albans is worth some comment. Other manuscripts which have been used as covers for the St. Albans Archdeaconry court books include a fragment from a thirteenth century life of St. Bernard, a leaf from a fourteenth century life of St. Thomas Aquinas, two leaves from the register of Abbot Ramridge, of St. Albans, and a collection of fragments from a missal and a compilation of proses which may have come from one of the Canterbury monasteries.

The endorsement, and as much of the document as can be read, run as follows. The necessary insertions made from the Vatican Register are bracketed, and indicated by notes.

<sup>1</sup> Papal Letters III, 1342-1362.

<sup>2</sup> Hertford County Record Office, ASA 8. Col. Le Hardy, County Archivist, first recognised the nature of the fragment.

Dispensacio Clementis Sexti de x monachis ordinandis  
citra xxv annum. . . .

Clemens episcopus, servus servorum dei. Dilecto filio Willelmo Abbati<sup>3</sup> Monasterii sancti Edmundi de Buri (ad)<sup>4</sup> Romanam ecclesiam nullo medio pertinentis, ordinis sancti Benedicti Norwicens' dioc' Salutem et Apostolicam benedictionem. Sincere devotionis<sup>5</sup> (affectus)<sup>6</sup> quem ad nos et Romanam geris ecclesiam promeretur ut votis tuis in hiis presertim que divini cultus augmentum respiciunt favorab(il)-iter annuamus.<sup>7</sup> Exhibita siquidem nobis nuper pro parte tua petitio continebat quod propter defectum monachorum presbiterorum tui monasterii tempore mortalitatis seu epidimie que preterito tempore in partibus illis vigit de medio subtractorum ipsum monasterium monachis presbiteris qui missas (et)<sup>8</sup> alia divina officia inibi celebrare valeant noscitur indigere. Quare pro parte tua nobis fuit humiliter supplicatum ut providere super hoc (de)<sup>9</sup> benignitate apostolica dignaremur. Nos igitur<sup>10</sup> itaque cultum adaugeri divinum nostris temporibus cupientes tuis in hac parte supplicationibus inclinati decem dumtaxat monachis eiusdem tui monasterii citra<sup>11</sup> vicesimum quintum annum in vicesimo tamen vel ulteriori etatis ipsorum anno constitutis.<sup>12</sup> quos ad hoc duxeris eligendos, ut a quocumque catholico antistite communionem et gratiam apostolice sedis habente presbiteratus ordinem recipere eidemque antistiti quod ad ordinem ipsum eosdem monachos per te ad hoc ut premititur eligendos statutis temporibus alias rite promovere libere et licite valeant quibuscumque constitutionibus apostolicis et aliis necnon monasterii predictorum ac ordinis sancti Benedicti statutis et consuetudini(bus)<sup>13</sup> contrariis nequaquam obstantibus auctoritate apostolica plenam et liberam de speciali gratia licentiam impartimur. Nulli ergo omnino hominum liceat hanc paginam nostre concessionis infringere vel ei ausu temerario contraire. Siquis autem hoc attemptare presumpserit indignationem omni-

<sup>3</sup> The Vatican Register (Reg. Vat. 201, fol 57) has 'Willermo Abbati'.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 'sincere' is spelt with a small letter in the Hertford version.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> For 'noscitur' the Register has 'noscuntur', incorrectly.

<sup>10</sup> 'igitur' is not in the Register.

<sup>11</sup> The Register has 'circa' but must be incorrect.

<sup>12</sup> In the Register the words 'alias idoneis' follow 'constitutis.'

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

potentis dei et beatorum Petri et Pauli Apostolicorum eius se noverit incursum. Dat' (Avinion)<sup>14</sup> xiiii kal' Februarii Pontificatus nostri Anno nono.

The bull may be translated as follows:—

Dispensation of Clement VI to ordain ten monks before they have reached their twenty-fifth year. . .

Clement the Bishop, servant of God's servants. Greetings and apostolic blessing to our beloved son William, Abbot of the monastery of Bury, which belongs to the Roman Church without any intermediary, of the order of St. Benedict and in Norwich diocese.

The sincerely devoted love which you bear for us and the Roman Church deserves that we should incline favourably to your wishes, particularly those which regard the increase of divine worship. Since there was recently exhibited to us for your part a petition, the contents of which were that because of the lack of monks who were also priests, at the time of the plague or epidemic, which in time past was raging in these parts, because of those who are missing, this monastery is known to be in need of monks who are also priests, who can celebrate mass and other divine services.

Wherefore we were humbly implored on your behalf that we would deign to do what was necessary in this matter, out of apostolic benevolence.

We, therefore, for that reason wishing in our present circumstances that the divine worship be made greater, have inclined favourably to your prayers, and communicate to you, by apostolic authority and out of special grace, full and unrestrained licence to promote ten monks and no more of this monastery of yours, from the age of twenty, or even younger up to the age of twenty-five or other suitable age, whom you have considered ought to be chosen, so that they may receive the orders of a priest from any catholic bishop who has communion and friendship with the apostolic see, and that these monks who are to be chosen by you may, as is said, freely and lawfully be promoted to these orders, at the times decreed, notwithstanding in any way any apostolic constitutions and other statutes and customs of the aforesaid monastery and the order of St. Benedict to the contrary.

It is therefore not allowed to anyone to violate this document of our licence or venture rashly to oppose it. If

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

any person, however, should presume to attempt this, may he incur the displeasure of Almighty God, and Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles.

Given at Avignon the 14th of the Kalends of February in the ninth year of our Pontificate.

The date of the Bull leaves little doubt that the outbreak was that of 1348, when 'Norwich, Yarmouth, Cambridge, and the Eastern Counties had been devastated.'<sup>15</sup> The 'confusion into which the diocese fell . . . owing to the ravages of the Black Death,'<sup>16</sup> and the corresponding confusion at the Papal Court are sufficient to account for the delay.

The most immediately important question, that of the number of monks who died as a result of the plague, does not admit of any easy solution. Plague took a rapid progress in claustral communities.<sup>17</sup> In 1260 there had been 80 monks and 21 chaplains in the monastery<sup>18</sup> while in 1381 there were 47 monks. The fact that the number of monks had risen to 62 in 1535 may indicate diminution owing to the Black Death.<sup>19</sup> More significant perhaps is the number of ordinands asked for by Bernham. It suggests that at least ten chaplains had died, and if it is assumed that the ratio of chaplains to monks was approximately what it had been a century ago, and that chaplains and monks had suffered equally, the estimated number of monks who died during the outbreak may be put at 40. This purely arbitrary figure can be compared with that of the 47 monks who died at St. Albans<sup>20</sup> a monastery of comparable importance. The difficulty found in obtaining ordinands of suitable age, however, might suggest an even larger number of dead. At all events St. Edmund's loss had been a heavy one.

<sup>15</sup> *England In The Later Middle Ages*, K. Vickers, p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, Thomas Arnold.

<sup>17</sup> As is suggested by the numerous grants of this nature in the Calendar of Papal Registers . . . IV 1362—1404, and such statements as that in the continuation of Higden, *Polychronicon* VIII, 345, 347, to the effect that 'in a certain house of religion, out of 20 but 2 were left alive.'

<sup>18</sup> *Victoria County History*; and J. Cox Russell, 'The Clerical Population in Medieval England,' in *Traditio*, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Victoria County History*.