CHAPTER I

# THE LIFE OF MATTHEW PARIS

THE writings of Matthew Paris, monk of St Albans and historian, seem to have come down to us almost intact, and it is from them that our very fragmentary knowledge of his life is derived. In the last century two great scholars, Madden and Liebermann, brought this information together,[1] and, since their work, not a scrap of new material concerning the events of Matthew's life has come to light. We have no knowledge of his family or even nationality. His name, which he usually wrote 'Parisiensis', but sometimes 'de Parisius', was formerly taken to refer either to this, or to his university education; and it was surmised in consequence either that Matthew was French, or that he was educated at Paris University. But Parisiensis was a common enough patronymic in thirteenth-century England, and, on the whole, it seems probable that Matthew was English, and that he did not receive his education at Paris, or indeed any other, university. His interests are not those of a university educated clerk, and his outlook is characteristically English. The phrase 'which in common speech we call Hoke Day' in his *Chronica Majora* (v, p. 281) shows that he thought of English as his own language; and his English feelings are displayed in his account of Henry III's campaign in Poitou in 1242, when he uses the phrase 'our men' ('nostri anglici') in reference to the English troops.[2]

The date of Matthew's birth also remains in doubt. He himself tells us that he took the religious habit (that is, became a monk) at St Albans on 21 January 1217.[3] It was customary at this time for a novice to take the habit when he entered the house, instead of waiting until he made his profession,[4] so that it is probable that Matthew entered St Albans as a novice in

[1] *HA.* III, pp. vii–xxii (Madden), and Liebermann, *MGH,SS.* XXVIII, pp. 74 ff. [2] *CM.* IV, pp. 210, 219. [3] *HA.* III, p. ix.

[4] That this was true for St Albans is shown by a statute of Abbot Warin; Wats, pp. 101–2. It was also the custom in Lanfranc's time: see his *Monastic Constitutions* (ed. M. D. Knowles), pp. 105–6.

1217, and made his profession a year or two later. At this time, the minimum age of admission for a novice could hardly have been under fifteen, so that the date of Matthew's birth cannot be placed much after 1200. It is unlikely, too, that he was born much before this, since he lived until 1259, and sixty must have been a ripe old age for a medieval monk. Some remarks of Matthew himself which might be taken as evidence for an earlier date than 1200 are in fact of very doubtful significance. In the *Chronica Majora*, for instance, he tells under the year 1195 the story of Vitalis the Venetian, with the following marginal note: 'King Richard's Apologue, which he related to Warin, abbot of St Albans; and which he (Warin) passed on to us' (*Apologus Ricardi regis quem abbati Sancti Albani Guarino et ipse nobis enarravit*).[1] If the word 'nobis' here means 'to me', then Matthew must have been born some years before the death of Abbot Warin in 1195; but in fact it probably only means 'to us', that is 'to the community'. Under the year 1213[2] Matthew inserts another story, which he says was related in his hearing (p. 564: 'audiente Mathaeo qui et haec scripsit') to various St Albans monks by Robert of London, the secular custodian of the abbey. Robert of London was secular 'custos' of St Albans in 1208,[3] but he may easily have visited the abbey on some later occasion. A third statement of Matthew's, this time in the *Gesta Abbatum*, is equally inconclusive: he says, in reference to Abbot John de Cella's extraordinary feats of memory:[4] 'Hoc enim quasi in confusionem nesciorum fecisse ipsum, profecto meminimus.' The word 'meminimus' here need not necessarily mean 'we remember', it may only mean 'we have recorded'; and so we are by no means compelled to conclude from this statement that Matthew Paris actually knew Abbot John, who died in 1214. It seems likely, therefore, that Matthew was born about the year 1200: at any rate there is no reliable evidence that he was born before this date.

We know nothing certain about Matthew between 1217 and 1247, but from the language of his chronicle it seems probable that he was present at Canterbury for the translation of St Thomas Becket on 7 July 1220; that he was at St Albans in 1228 when

[1] II, pp. 413–14.
[2] *CM*. II, pp. 559–64.
[3] *HA*. III, p. xi.
[4] Wats, p. 108.

the abbey was visited by an Armenian archbishop; and that he attended the marriage of Henry III and Eleanor at Westminster in January 1236.[1] His account of each of these events seems to be that of an eye-witness. Our lack of knowledge of Matthew Paris during these years is probably due to the life he was leading as a cloistered monk at St Albans; and we may assume that throughout this time, as well as during most of the rest of his life, it was only occasionally that he interrupted his historical writing (in which he was probably more or less continually engaged from *c.* 1245 onwards) and the service of God in his house, to witness some great event either at Westminster, Canterbury, Winchester, or some other centre. How he was enabled to leave the abbey from time to time in this way, we do not know. It is possible, as Professor Cheney has suggested to me, that he held some such office as chaplain to the abbot; but there is, so far as I have been able to discover, no evidence in contemporary records of any monastic official at St Albans at this time by the name of Matthew. On 13 October 1247 Matthew Paris was present at Westminster for the feast of St Edward the Confessor, and his account shows that Henry III knew by this time that he was writing a chronicle, and had already met him, perhaps during one of his many visits to St Albans.[2] Matthew's account of his meeting with the king on this occasion is as follows:[3]

> And while...the king was seated on his throne, noticing the writer of this work, he called him to him, made him sit down on a step between the throne and the rest of the hall, and said to him: 'You have noticed all these things, and they are firmly impressed on your mind.' To which he answered: 'Yes, my Lord, for the splendid doings of this day are worthy of record.' The king then went on: '...I entreat you...therefore...to write an accurate and full account of all these events...lest in the future their memory be in any way lost to posterity'; and he invited the person with whom he was speaking to dinner, together with his three companions.

Under the year 1250[4] Matthew has recorded another of his conversations with the king, which perhaps occurred in April

[1] *HA.* II, pp. 241–2; *CM.* III, pp. 161–4; and *CM.* III, pp. 336 ff.
[2] For these see below, pp. 12–13.
[3] *CM.* IV, pp. 644–5.
[4] *CM.* V, pp. 129–30.

1251, when the king was at St Albans.[1] On this occasion, he tells us, he remonstrated with the king for granting rights of free warren contrary to the privileges of St Albans. In July 1251 Matthew was with the king again, this time at Winchester, and he there heard and noted down at length Thomas of Sherborne's account of the Pastoureaux in France.[2] In November 1251 he may have been present at the dedication of the church of Hayles in Gloucestershire, and at Christmas at York for the marriage of Henry III's daughter Margaret to Alexander II of Scotland; for his accounts of these events seem to be those of an eye-witness.[3] Finally, we hear of him again with Henry III at St Albans in March 1257,[4] when he spent some time in the king's company both at table and in the royal lodgings. On this occasion the king imparted to him some historical information, including a list of the canonized kings of England (which Matthew inserted into his chronicle) and the names of two hundred and fifty English baronies. During the week which the king spent at St Albans at this time, Matthew had an opportunity of putting in a good word to him on behalf of the University of Oxford, whose M.A.'s had sent a deputation to complain of the oppression of the bishop of Lincoln.

Matthew's life as a monk of St Albans was on one occasion disturbed much more seriously than by the occasional visits to Westminster or elsewhere which we have hitherto noted. It seems that in the year 1246, as a result of the disappearance of its abbot with the convent's seal, the abbey of St Benet Holm on the island of Nidarholm in Norway got into serious financial difficulties with the London Cahorsins.[5] King Haakon of Norway sent the prior to England with a letter to Matthew Paris, requesting his help; and, through his good offices, an agreement was reached with the money-lenders which enabled the monks of St Benet Holm to free themselves from debt. In 1247 or 1248, however, they were in trouble again; this time because of a quarrel with their archbishop, and they were advised by the papal legate then in Norway to apply to the

[1] *CM*. v, pp. 233–4.
[2] *CM*. v, pp. 246–54.
[3] *CM*. v, pp. 262 and 266–7.
[4] *CM*. v, pp. 617–18.
[5] *CM*. v, pp. 42–5. I have also used the narrative in Knowles, *Religious Orders*, I, pp. 294–5.

pope for someone to visit and reform their house. Innocent IV allowed them to choose whom they liked, and they decided on Matthew Paris, probably because of his previous services to them. The papal mandate to the abbot of St Albans instructing him to send Matthew to Norway to reform the monastery of St Benet Holm is copied out by Matthew Paris in four of his manuscripts. Although by it Matthew is only appointed to instruct and advise the abbot and monks of St Benet Holm 'in regularibus disciplinis et statutis' pertaining to the Benedictine Order, he copied it into his collection of additional documents with this heading:[1]

> The original papal document (*Auctenticum papale*) by which Dom Matthew Paris, who wrote these things, was appointed, though unwillingly, reformer of the Benedictine observance and Visitor of the Benedictine abbeys and their monks in the kingdom of Norway.

In his *Historia Anglorum*[2] he introduces the same document with similar words:

> ...Brother Matthew, the author of this work, was sent by order of the pope to Norway, to restore Benedictine observance in the monasteries of the Black monks (*ad reformandum Ordinem Sancti Benedicti in coenobiis monachorum Nigri Ordinis*).

It looks very much as if Matthew's natural pride in his appointment caused him to magnify the importance of this mission and to consider himself Visitor to the whole of the Benedictine Order in Norway. Be this as it may, his visit there poses an interesting problem. No doubt the monks of St Benet Holm chose Matthew as their Visitor on account of the services he had previously rendered them; but why did King Haakon write to him, in 1246, asking him to negotiate with the Cahorsin money-lenders in London on behalf of the monks of St Benet Holm? H. G. Leach[3] suggested that Matthew's visit to Norway in 1248 was perhaps not his first, and that he had met Haakon on a previous visit there. Matthew, however, tells us nothing of this, and it is most unlikely that, had such an event taken place, he would have passed over it in silence. The mystery of Haakon's selection of Matthew as his financial agent in this

[1] *LA*, f. 92b; for the heading, see *CM*. v, p. 244, note 4.
[2] III, p. 40. [3] *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia*, p. 105.

affair is perhaps partly elucidated, however, by his appointment, in 1238, of a certain Richard of St Albans to look after his affairs in England,[1] for it is possible that this Richard, relinquishing his post, recommended Matthew to Haakon as a suitable successor. Nevertheless, however we try to explain the choice of Matthew in this matter, we still do not know why he was considered suitable; and we can only hazard the guess that the interest in and knowledge of financial matters which he displays throughout his writings[2] reflect a considerable experience in practical affairs, which he had perhaps already obtained before 1246, and which qualified him to undertake these transactions.

The papal mandate sending Matthew to Norway is dated 27 November 1247, and it probably arrived at St Albans early in 1248; but it was not until the early summer that Matthew finally set out for Norway. He arrived at the port of Bergen *c.* 10 June,[3] at the very moment when a great fire was raging in the city. Both Matthew and the author of Haakon's Saga give a vivid description of this fire, which was followed by a violent thunderstorm over the town.[4] Haakon's Saga describes how the lightning struck the mast of a ship in the harbour and dashed it into small pieces, and how only one person on the ship was hurt—a citizen of Bergen who had gone on board from the town to buy finery. Matthew, who was ashore at the time celebrating mass in a neighbouring church, and thanking God for his safe passage through the perils of the sea, also describes how the mast of his ship was shivered into pieces, but he, with the pardonable hyperbole of a passenger, claims that, besides one man killed, all those on the ship were either wounded or hurt in some way. He goes on to record how, when Haakon heard of this accident, he provided the ship with a new and bigger and better ('praestantiorem . . . et majorem') mast. Haakon was in Bergen at the time,[5] and Matthew delivered to him letters from King Louis IX of France seeking Haakon's company on his projected crusade,

[1] Rymer (ed.), *Foedera*, I, p. 236.
[2] See below, pp. 145–6.
[3] Leach, *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia*, p. 105.
[4] *CM*. V, pp. 35–6, and Dasent (ed.), *Saga of Hacon*, pp. 266–7.
[5] Dasent (ed.), *Saga of Hacon*, p. 266: he organized attempts to extinguish the fire with 'kettles' full of sea-water.

and giving him permission to land in French territory on his way. Haakon received Matthew kindly and rewarded him with sumptuous gifts.[1] It would be interesting to know how Matthew Paris came to be the bearer of these important letters from Louis IX. Was it mere chance? Or did that monarch have personal knowledge of the monk of St Albans? There is no hint, in Matthew's writings, of the answer to these questions; nor indeed does he give us any further information about his visit to Norway and his reformation of the monks of St Benet Holm. He does not even mention his return journey, which probably took place in 1249.

We have now passed in review the few known facts about the life of Matthew Paris. The last of these, his death in 1259, was once undisputed; but recently Sir Maurice Powicke has cast doubts on this, and has argued that Matthew may have lived 'for some little time after 1259'.[2] The belief that Matthew died in this year is based on the colophon which closes the text of his *Chronica Majora*, and which is illustrated in Plate I. The text of this, as translated by Professor Galbraith,[3] reads:

> Thus far wrote (*perscripsit*) the venerable man, brother Matthew Paris: and though the hand on the pen may vary, nevertheless, as the same method of composition is maintained throughout, the whole is ascribed to him. What has been added and continued from this point onwards may be ascribed to another brother, who presuming to approach the works of so great a predecessor, and unworthy to continue them, as he is unworthy to undo the latchet of his shoe, has not deserved to have even his name mentioned on the page.

Below these words is a drawing of Matthew on his death-bed, with his 'book of chronicles' on the desk by him, and with the words 'Hic obit Matheus Parisiensis' written above. Professor Galbraith, in his criticism of Sir Maurice Powicke's theory, produced other evidence for the date of Matthew's death. He pointed out that the continuator of Matthew's *Gesta Abbatum* states that Matthew Paris lived and died in the time of Abbot

[1] See below, p. 18.
[2] Powicke, 'Compilation of the *Chronica Majora*', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXX (1944), pp. 157–8.
[3] Galbraith, *Roger Wendover and Matthew Paris*, p. 12.

John of Hertford.[1] Now H. T. Riley, in his edition of the *Gesta Abbatum*, claims that Abbot John ruled from 1235 to 1260, and suggests that the text of the *Gesta Abbatum* from about the year 1255 to 1308 was written by a monk who lived in the early years of the fourteenth century.[2] If Riley were right on these two points, the statement about Matthew referred to by Professor Galbraith would constitute evidence that he died before 1260. In fact, however, Abbot John of Hertford did not die in 1260, but in 1263. The date 1260 is found only in the latest manuscript of the *Gesta Abbatum* (written by Walsingham), and is due to a copying error. The true date, 1263, is given in the Bute manuscript of the *Gesta Abbatum* and in the *Flores Historiarum*, and it can also be inferred from the record evidence.[3] Furthermore there is evidence that the statement that Matthew Paris lived and died in the time of Abbot John occurs in a passage added to the *Gesta Abbatum* by Thomas Walsingham, and that it did not form part of the so-called 'Second Continuation' of the *Gesta Abbatum* which Riley thought was written in the first half of the fourteenth century. It is found only in Walsingham's manuscript of the *Gesta*, where it follows a series of extracts from the *Chronica Majora* which are likewise only in the Walsingham manuscript. It seems that Walsingham, having extracted a considerable amount of material from Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora*, inserted this statement into his description of the rule of Abbot John as a memorial to his famous predecessor, and on exactly the same evidence as modern historical opinion has supposed Matthew to have died in 1259, namely, the colophon at the end of the text of the *Chronica Majora*.

Sir Maurice Powicke had no positive evidence that Matthew lived after 1259, but he considered that the evidence from the colophon and picture at the end of Matthew's chronicle was inconclusive, and he further remarked that 'in the course of original composition, a time-lag [i.e. between the events and

[1] Galbraith, *Roger Wendover and Matthew Paris*, p. 30.
[2] Perhaps William Rishanger: *GA.* II, pp. ix–xiii, and I, p. xvii.
[3] Bute MS. 3, p. 278 (the manuscript called by Wats the 'Spelman MS.'; it was not known to Riley; its text ends in 1308, and it was written independently of the Walsingham MS., *c.* 1400); *FH.* II, p. 478; *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1258–66*, p. 256 (23 April 1263): grant of abbey to prior and convent during vacancy for 600 marks.

the recording of them] of a year or more was almost inevitable', and he showed that the annal for 1252 in the *Chronica Majora* was not written before November 1253.[1] Powicke's conclusion is, on the face of it, eminently reasonable. One would not expect an author to bring the text of his chronicle right up to the time of his death, and the inference from the colophon might very well only be that Matthew died (perhaps in 1260 or 1261 or even later) at a time when the text of his chronicle had arrived at the point, during the annal for 1259, where it is inserted. In spite of this, however, I think it far more likely that Matthew was overtaken by death very soon after the occurrence of the last event recorded in his chronicle. In a work of the scope and size of the *Chronica Majora*, the author must surely have recorded events in a first rough draft almost as soon as news of them reached him. In the course of the annal for 1256[2] Matthew records the departure abroad of certain people, and adds that he does not know why they went: a confession of ignorance which is understandable only if it was included inadvertently in the final text from a rough draft made very soon after their departure—especially as they were back in England again in January 1257.[3] There is more evidence for the use of rough drafts in the course of the annal for 1257, where a number of entries are repeated, apparently because they were carelessly copied twice from a series of rough drafts written perhaps on loose sheets and scraps of parchment. There is, in fact, every reason to believe that Matthew wrote out rough drafts immediately on receipt of the information he wished to record, and that these were later used for writing up the final text of the chronicle in the existing manuscripts (*B* and *R*). If this is so, it by no means follows that, because there was a time-lag of a year or two between events and the recording of them in the manuscript of the *Chronica Majora*, Matthew died perhaps a year or more after the date of the last event recorded in his chronicle. On the contrary, there was probably no such time-lag between the events and the composition of his drafts, and these latter no doubt continued right up to the time of his death. Composed and probably written out by Matthew himself, and

[1] Powicke, 'Compilation of the *Chronica Majora*', *loc. cit.* pp. 157–8.
[2] *CM.* v, p. 560.
[3] *CM.* v, p. 618.

kept up to date, as I suppose, these would have been ready at hand for Matthew's scribe to copy out into the *Chronica Majora* after his death, thus bringing its text up to the last event recorded by Matthew in draft.

The obvious implication of the picture which accompanies the colophon at the end of Matthew's *Chronica Majora* (Plate 1) is that he died while still at work on it, and there is in fact much evidence to show that Matthew continued to write out his own manuscripts until failing powers forced him to employ a scribe. In the *Liber Additamentorum*, for instance, there is a series of documents in just the rough chronological order we should expect to find had they been copied as their texts became available to Matthew. These documents extend from f. 71 to f. 82; they are all in Matthew's own handwriting; and they extend in date from 1255 to 1259.[1] The last, a document of March 1259, is the latest piece of writing that has survived in Matthew's own hand, and it is clearly the work of a person of failing powers.[2] It is followed by some documents of 1258 copied into the book by the scribe who helped Matthew to complete the texts of his historical manuscripts, and who wrote the colophon we have been discussing.[3] This, I think, shows that Matthew's powers failed in the spring or early summer of 1259. Had he lived beyond the summer of this year, we should expect to find at any rate some signs of his continued use of the *Liber Additamentorum*, of all his manuscripts the most intimate and personal. The scribe of the colophon at the end of Matthew's *Chronica Majora* distinguishes carefully between that work and his own continuation of it, and if, as I have suggested, Matthew died shortly after the end of the text ascribed to him, we may assume also that he did so before the earliest event recorded in the continuation. The original version of this continuation is no longer extant, but, as Madden has shown,[4] a transcript of it was

[1] See pp. 82–3 below.

[2] See Vaughan, 'The handwriting of Matthew Paris', *Trans. Camb. Bibliog. Soc.* 1 (1953), Plate XVII (*d*) and p. 388.

[3] *HA.* I, p. li and note 1. Besides these documents in the *Liber Additamentorum*, this scribe wrote the last part of the texts of Matthew's *Chronica Majora* (*R*, ff. 210a–218b); *Historia Anglorum* (*R*, ff. 154b–156b); and *Abbreviatio Chronicorum* (B.M. Cotton MS. Claudius D vi, ff. 87b–94b).

[4] *HA.* I, p. xxiii, note 2. See also Galbraith (ed.), *St Albans Chronicle, 1406–1420* (1937), p. xxviii.