ENGLISH MONASTIC FINANCES IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

INTRODUCTION

To most Englishmen the one great event which the mention of monasticism brings to mind is the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The centuries during which the religious houses stood to the world around as havens wherein it was possible, for some at least, to attain that life which to the mediaeval mind was beyond question the highest, are overshadowed by the moment in which they fell. With that fall questions are connected round which historians have joined in what may seem a battle incapable of ending. Whether the suppression of the monasteries was just or necessary, whether they had degenerated, whether their downfall represents only the achievement of one despotic will, defending itself by purchased lies and winning acquiescence by wholesale corruption, are questions which still bulk large. No student of monastic life and history can ignore them; each is in some measure bound to regard his work as a contribution towards their solution. It is perhaps inevitable that it should be so. Few can contentedly leave it an open question whether, at the beginning of the history of modern England, an institution was destroyed endowed with potentialities of good not otherwise to be attained. Any study of English monasticism, after its earliest ages, is sure to be regarded as in some measure a contribution towards the settling of the problems of the Dissolution. Even from this point of view, not the least promising subject to which research can be directed is monastic finance in the later Middle Ages.

Most historians who deal with the Dissolution have hitherto depended mainly on evidence drawn from the records of the late fifteenth or the early sixteenth century. Here the question is now becoming one rather of interpretation than of discovery. But the period from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, from the time when the last great mediaeval movement of monasticism proper reached England from Cîteaux, to the time when the life

of the English monasteries was drawing to a close, still awaits full and adequate treatment. The gap must be filled up to understand fully the conditions prevailing in the sixteenth century. The early stages of monastic movements have been carefully traced. They will always possess the attraction which a noble and unworldly enthusiasm exerts even on those to whom the end does not seem altogether worthy of the zeal with which it is pursued. The conditions of the sixteenth century have been closely scrutinised, if only for polemic purposes. But, for the intervening centuries, though much has been done in the direction of the publication of evidence, comparison and generalisation still lag behind. The workaday life of the monasteries from the twelfth century onward has been taken somewhat too much for granted. Cardinal Gasquet's *Henry VIII and the Monasteries*, for example, deals more adequately with the King than with his victims. Sixteenth century evidence is interpreted without much investigation of the earlier history. Nor does his *English Monasticism* fill the gap. It is based for the most part on Rules, Custumals, and similar documents, and therefore presents a picture in which monastic life is represented without sufficient allowance for the inevitable discrepancies between the ideal and the real. Rules and regulations were not everything. Accounts based on such material cannot be accepted as complete until they have been checked by the examination of masses of material, produced, without much purpose of edification, by the monks themselves, and showing, with varying degrees of clearness, the actual course of their daily life. The gap which too often existed between mediaeval ideals and realities may possibly have existed here as well.

The following pages are an attempt to examine the actual course of monastic life from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, from one special point of view—that of finance. The economic standpoint lacks, perhaps, some of the attractiveness of other methods of approaching monastic history. We cannot concern ourselves with the great leaders of the monastic movement. The exact direction given to the successive waves of ascetic enthusiasm, influencing the mental outlook of the whole of European society, hardly concerns us. We must occupy ourselves simply with the monasteries as holders of property, and try to see

something of the day-to-day business in which the monks were thus involved, and of its effect upon the secular world with which they were thus brought into direct contact. A method which, even here, will almost reduce the work of a Matthew Paris or a Roger Bacon to records of the purchase of ink and parchment has very obvious limitations. But the disadvantage is not so great as it seems. The materials which offer themselves are beyond suspicion. They are first hand evidence set down by men with no thought that the records which they left would ever become the objects of historical curiosity. They are, for the most part, mere business documents, compiled in the ordinary run of daily life without any other motive than the enlightenment of those concerned in the business affairs of the religious houses. So far as they can be interpreted, they give an admirable opportunity for inquiry into the normal conditions of monastic life on its material side.

Six main questions are here considered: the population of the religious houses, their organisation, the main features of monastic revenue and of expenditure, the general condition and management of the monastic economy, as shown by the evidence as to debt and the financial expedients adopted to meet it, and lastly a brief consideration of the general tone of monastic life as shown in the material conditions of life within the house.

Complete answers to these questions would not only throw light upon many sides of the social life of the Middle Ages, but would place us in a much better position to deal with the problems of the Dissolution. Completeness, however, is the last thing that could be claimed for the following pages. Much printed evidence exists besides that upon which they are based. In many cases the work which they contain represents little more than a verification of the work of others. Masses of material still remain unprinted; many points of interest and importance are left untouched; the history of the friaries, and in great part that of the nunneries, are perforce set aside, together with the whole question of the relations of both to education. No attempt is made to deal with the wide problems of the management of monastic estates, the decline of villeinage, and the relations between the monasteries and the towns which so often grew up around them.

A few words may be necessary as to the nature of the original authorities followed. They may be ranked in four main divisions. The first consists of legislative enactments, and covers such material as is to be found in the Statute Book and the Rolls of Parliament, the Rules of the monastic Orders, with their various Papal recensions, the Statutes promulgated by the Benedictine Provincial Chapters after the creation of the Benedictine Congregations by the Lateran Council of 1215, and other similar documents. The second group contains the records of visitations held by the bishops or by the visitors of the Orders exempt from episcopal authority, and is valuable as giving the results of an external but friendly criticism. In the third division are such documents as form the staple of Dugdale's *Monasticon* and the various chartularies published; records of the donations of benefactors, of papal or royal grants of privilege, surveys, inquisitions and rentals, regulations for the appointment of the revenues and work of the house, memoranda of rights and dues—records, in short, of all the business documents of the house which were thought likely to be of permanent use in the management of its affairs. Under this head too may be classed the numerous monastic annals and chronicles published in the Rolls Series, most of which have something to say on the varying fortunes of the houses in which they were written, whilst one—the Chronicle of the Cistercian House of Meaux—is practically devoted to that one topic alone. In the last division may be placed the actual account-rolls and balance-sheets of the monasteries, many of which have been published, while many more still remain in manuscript. These accounts are of the first importance. They show the working of the monastic economic organisation in all its complex details, and reflect without any possibility of *arrière pensée* the internal life of the monastery and the actual relations of the monks with the outside world. At the same time it must be admitted that these documents—or such at least as have been published—are disappointing in two respects. In the first place they belong, as is natural, mainly to those great houses which had at their back sufficient endowments to carry them with comparative ease through difficulties under which the accounts of the less wealthy and more numerous houses would have shown greater traces of the struggle, and would therefore have been of greater interest

for purposes of generalisation as to the effect of the economic crises through which the houses passed. Secondly, the collection for any one house is usually fragmentary; and this, together with the extreme complexity of curt detail which the accounts present, makes combination and generalisation difficult often to the point of impossibility. Thus, for example, among the accounts of the obedientiaries of Abingdon Abbey, in a collection ranging from 1322 to 1478, the year 1422–3 is the only one for which we have the accounts of more than one obedientiary, and even in that case, the offices represented are of quite minor importance, the refectorer's and the chapel warden's. A similar difficulty is found in dealing with the larger collection of Compotus Rolls of St Swithun's Priory, Winchester. It is often hard, therefore, to grasp the exact relationship between the various officers of the monastery, or to enter into calculations as to the percentage of income spent in alms, on books, and so on. Despite all these difficulties, the value of what we have is inestimable. To quote the editor of the Chronicle of Meaux: "A real obscurity hangs over the actual history of the several monasteries. The knowledge we have of them is mainly confined to their external condition. When the monks wrote of themselves for the edification of the world at large, a great deal was said of their holiness of life, and little of their shortcoming—little too of their indirect influence, good or evil, on the people they were planted amongst." These documents give us an opportunity of making some estimate of what that influence was. Glimpses may be caught in every direction of such parts of mediaeval life as were affected by those monasteries whose accounts we possess; and everywhere we feel that firm ground is beneath our feet, even if we can see only a little way.

CHAPTER I

THE MONASTIC POPULATION

THE monasteries, during the period under consideration, were not inhabited by monks alone: and the fact must be borne in mind in order to understand the claims made upon monastic revenue. As will shortly be seen, it is not going too far to say that in the larger houses at any rate (for which the fullest information is obtainable) from a third to a half only of those dwelling in the monasteries from the close of the thirteenth century onwards were professed monks. Three classes of men found homes within the monastic precincts: the regular monks (with whom may be reckoned the novices), the lay brethren, and the laymen who for one cause or another were admitted to dwell with the monks. Something must be said of the latter classes, and the proportions which at various times they bore to the regulars, in order that the changes which went on inside the monasteries may be made clear.

The lay brethren, or "conversi," were chiefly of importance among the Cistercians: for although other monastic Orders adopted the system of enrolling lay brethren, in the English religious houses, at all events, it never seems to have obtained firm hold. Thus in 1275–6 the delegates of the Cluniac Order visiting eleven of the English houses found in them 254 monks, but only nine lay brethren[1]. But in the early days of the Cistercian Order, the conversi were a large and important class. They represent what may be called an attempt to democratise monasticism, to enlist in its service representatives of those classes in which the Mendicant Orders later found their chief strength and weakness. For the most part, they were of the lower orders, artisans, husbandmen, or labourers, although it is possible to find exceptional cases in which some member of a noble family, eager to enter on the ascetic life, but barred (or in his humility, feigning to be barred) by his illiteracy from obtaining admission to a monastery as one of the religious, was content to accept the subordinate station of a lay brother. The conversi served the

[1] See Appendix A.

monastery to which they were attached, not as the educated monks, largely by service in the choir, but by plying their several crafts, or, it would seem, at a later date by supervising the workers on the estates held in demesne. They undertook the ordinary monastic obligations of poverty, chastity and obedience to their superior, but were subject to less stringent regulations as to attendance in the choir, fasting and vigils. They were definitely regarded as a class of less dignity than the regular monks, and were rarely or never allowed to advance by application to study, to the status of full monachism. In the Cistercian Statutes of 1256[1], which give elaborate details as to the feast days on which the lay brethren should be free from labour, the services at which they should be present, the frequency of their communions and so on, it is particularly enjoined that "no conversus is to have a book, or learn anything save the Paternoster, the Creed, the Miserere and Ave Maria, and the rest which it is decreed that they ought to say, and this not by letter, but by heart." The theory on which the lay brethren were admitted is well illustrated by a passage in the Observances of the Augustinian Priory at Barnwell[2]. "Lay brethren are not to be admitted to the habit unless they are instructed in some craft which is useful to the monastery; for as regular canons ought to be occupied day and night in things spiritual, so lay brethren ought to labour for the profit of the Church in things corporeal."

The Chronicle of the Abbey of Meaux, one of the great Yorkshire religious houses, shows at once, as its editor points out, the importance of this class of semi-monks in a Cistercian monastery, and the ultimate decline of the system even among those with whom it had found its chief strength. It is possible to trace the numbers of conversi at Meaux from the beginning of the thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century: and these two centuries saw the disappearance of a class originally more numerous than the professed monks. In the Chronicle there is recorded the number of deaths at Meaux during the general interdict of 1214–30[3]. Seven monks and one novice died, as compared with 16 conversi; and the conclusion may be safely drawn that

[1] J. T. Fowler, *Cistercian Statutes*, p. 97.
[2] J. W. Clark, *Observances at the Augustinian Priory of St Giles and St Andrew*, p. 223.
[3] Sir E. A. Bond, *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, I, p. 343.

the lay brethren at that date far outnumbered the monks, and indeed that their number was not improbably twice as great as that of the professed. Nor was this proportion unusual: Waverley, the first Cistercian house founded in England, in 1187, or 59 years after its establishment, consisted of 70 monks and 120 lay brethren[1]. The next date for which we have a statement of the number of conversi at Meaux is 1249; 99 years after its foundation, on the death of the eighth abbot, Michael, there were only 90 lay brethren to 60 monks[2]. Exactly a century later, in the year when the Black Death reached Meaux, there were only seven lay brethren actually in the house, as compared with 43 monks[3]; although it is possible, as the editor points out with regard to a later entry, that there were others employed as bailiffs and labourers on the farms of the monastery. Long before this date, however, difficulties had arisen with the conversi; for, about 1230, Abbot Richard of Ottringham found it necessary to put some check upon the arrogance of the lay brothers in charge of the granges and farms, and had to remove them from their positions and set them to menial work—keeping pigs or cattle, ploughing, joinery, stone-cutting, glazing, or plumbing[4]: whilst under his successor, the conversi seriously offended one of the neighbouring landowners, and so involved the house in trouble[5]. These difficulties seem to have continued, for at last, under the eighteenth abbot, William of Scarborough (1372–96), things came to a crisis. "In his time," says the Chronicle, "all the conversi withdrew from the monastery,"[6] and the number of monks was increased to make up for it. Sir E. A. Bond suggests that the meaning of these words possibly may be that the lay brethren who lived within the house—the "conversi claustrales"—ceased to exist as a class, but that they still remained on the farms; he supports his suggestion by quoting from a Rental of 1396 a passage in which the "conversi claustrales" and the "grangarii," are mentioned in such close connection that it is possible to ascribe to the latter word the meaning of "conversi of the granges." But, as he goes on to point out,

[1] *Annales Monastici* (R.S.), II, p. 244.
[2] Sir E. A. Bond, *op. cit.* III, p. 77.
[3] *Ibid.* II, p. 65.
[4] *Ibid.* I, p. 432.
[5] *Ibid.* II, p. 4.
[6] *Ibid.* I, p. 430; III, p. xliii.

in the manuscript documents collected at the close of the fourteenth century by Abbot Thomas Burton, the writer of the Chronicle, there is nowhere any mention of lay brethren. The probability is that in this house at least, this subordinate class of the religious was allowed to drop out of existence before the beginning of the fifteenth century. The relative numbers of another Cistercian house—Whalley Abbey—as given in the record of a visitation by the Abbot of Rievaulx in 1367[1], show a similar absence of lay brethren, although the lack of earlier figures prevents us from tracing the decline. Here there were 29 monks and only one conversus. There is a singular lack of information upon this point, as upon all others connected with the monastic population: but everything points to the conclusion that the English houses were affected to the full by the decline in the importance of the lay brethren which unquestionably showed itself in the Cistercian Order as a whole.

The truth seems to be that in the attempt to introduce the lower classes into the ranks of those leading the ascetic life, much the same difficulty was found as was experienced by the Mendicant Orders. The conversi seem to have been turbulent and unruly, a difficult class to deal with, and, when placed in control of the monastic property—a practice very generally adopted in the granges or manors in demesne—liable to fall into the sin of owning private property, or becoming "proprietaries," as it was technically called. Such was found to be the case at Evesham during the abbacy of John de Brokhampton (1283–1316),

> As his predecessors had placed over the manors of the vale certain brethren called conversi, who had nearly demolished everything, this abbot, to the great advantage of the house, lest they should become proprietaries any further, had them all recalled, to perform their vows in the monastery by fasting and prayer[2].

While the Benedictines of Evesham and the Cistercians of Meaux found their lay brethren hard to keep in hand, much about the same time the Augustinian canons of the Priory of

[1] T. D. Whitaker, *History of Whalley*, I, p. 98.

[2] *Chronicon Abbatiæ de Evesham* (R.S.), p. 285. The revolt of the Gilbertine conversi against the severity of their life, during the lifetime of St Gilbert, is well known. Miss Rose Graham, *St Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines*, pp. 19–23. Within a century of its founder's death the Order of Gramont was nearly wrecked by rebellion among the conversi. Hélyot, *Ordres Monastiques*, VI, p. 197.

St Oswald, Gloucester, were on bad terms with theirs. In 1250 Walter Gray, Archbishop of York, as the result of a visitation, besides laying down regulations as to the dress of the conversi, found it necessary to impose a rule that the canons were to have control over the conversi both within and without the monastery, and that no conversus was to have any authority over the canons[1]. The Continental houses were not exempt from similar troubles. Thus the Annals of Waverley note two great crimes committed in foreign Cistercian houses, in each case by a lay brother. In 1197, Reginald, Abbot of Garendon, was stabbed by a conversus in the infirmary of his monastery, and in consequence the General Chapter of the Order decreed that all the conversi of that place should be dispersed. In 1226 a lay brother of the Belgian house of Bodeloa murdered his abbot, and again all the conversi were ejected, thenceforth not to be recalled. The additions to the Cistercian Statutes of 1256 reflect the insubordination of the lay brethren. It had been determined that such men were to be received as conversi as were able to answer for the labour of one hired workman. The General Chapter of 1261 ordered that any conversus who would not perform the labour enjoined upon him was to be reduced to the position of a hired servant at the will of the visitor, and meantime was to be fed on coarse bread[2].

But, as Sir E. A. Bond points out[3], just as the origin of the order of conversi among the Cistercians is to be connected with the revival in that Order of manual, and especially agricultural, labour as a most important element in the monastic ideal and Rule, so its decline must be considered as due to the gradual falling away of the Cistercians from their original insistence upon that importance. The agricultural employments of the Order in its early days brought a large amount of land under actual cultivation by the inmates of the monasteries, while the isolation of the houses in waste places made it necessary for each monastery to be equipped with the crafts required for the repair of buildings or implements. There was room, therefore, for a large class of men willing to take the bulk of this manual labour upon themselves, bearing the main part of the burden of pro-

[1] *Register of Archbishop Giffard* (S.S.), p. 205.
[2] J. T. Fowler, *Cistercian Statutes*, p. 122. "Ad familiaris habitum."
[3] *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, III, p. xliv.