

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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VI. TOWN HERMITS

If a hermit dwell in a borough, town, or city, or nigh thereto where each day he can well beg his daily bread, let him before sunset distribute to Christ's poor that which remains of his food.—*Rule of Hermits*, Bodleian MS.

The city of London seems a strange place in which to seek solitude, yet there were hermits by Cripple-gate, Aldgate, Bishopsgate, and also near the Tower. In the present Monkwell street stood the cell of St. James, "in the corner towards the west near Cripple-gate," that is, in the comparatively retired spot formed by the north-west angle of the city wall, between the gate and the bastion which may still be seen in the churchyard of St. Giles. It was an ancient foundation, for the architectural features of the crypt below the chapel were Norman. Brother Warin, chaplain of Richard I dwelt here. It was afterwards granted to Robert Bat, rector of St. Bride's, with the provision that he entered the hermitage¹ immediately and religiously stayed therein. Probably he did not comply with the condition, for Jordan de Eston was subsequently appointed to serve it. One of Henry III's last nominees was Robert de S. Laurencio. After remaining there for over twenty years, he became incapacitated, and William de Wyntreburn, chaplain, was admitted to the cell—"provided that he behave himself well and honourably, that he devote himself to his sacred office, minister to Brother Robert, the hermit of the place, who is feeble, and maintain him in a fitting manner for as long as he lives". Three months later the old man died, and was succeeded by his companion, who stayed four years and then resigned.

In 1311, the Bishop prohibited Thomas de Byreford, who, living as hermit there, took upon himself to hear confessions, administer sacraments, offer indulgences and do other un-

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authorized things. Some time previous to 1290, St. James's hermitage was enlarged, and, in 1332, the king granted the custody thereof to William Lyons and two other priests, and to Alan Chauns, hermit. When in old age William Lyons

was “broken with bodily weakness,” a chaplain was sent to his aid.

All these men were nominated by the Crown^[1], but the cell changed hands frequently, and, during voidance [when the cell was unoccupied], damage was done to the muniments, ornaments, and goods. Edward I committed the custody of the place to the mayor, and afterwards to the Constable of the Tower. Edward III, however granted the advowson to the abbot and convent of Garendon. One of their nominees, John de Flytewyk, stayed only one year. He was a priest on the staff of the lazar-house [leper hospital] of St. Mary de Pré near St. Albans. He failed to obtain permission to depart, but went nevertheless to the Cistercian Abbey of Garendon, by whom he was admitted to the hermitage. He afterwards resumed the Benedictine habit.² [He went from being a Cistercian, back to being a Benedictine again.]

About this time the Cripplegate cell became a chantry chapel^[2]. In 1347, new endowments were provided by the Countess of Pembroke, who founded a chantry for the soul of Aymer de Valence. John *Ayobanensis* (formerly bishop-suffragan in the sees of Canterbury and Exeter) dated his will from this place in 1380.³ During the fifteenth century it appears to have been a corporate body with a common seal.⁴ After the Dissolution, the property came into the hands of the Clothworkers’ Company, and became known as “Lambe’s chapel”.

There was also a hermitage on the south side of Aldgate. This cell was built in a turret of the city wall by John the hermit—possibly that John le Megre, who in 1259 was allowed to “transfer himself from the hermitage of Alegate, where he has lived for some years,” to that of Cripplegate. The *Hundred Rolls* record that the building encroached on the highway to the extent of 4 feet in one direction and 33 feet in another. Brother Berengar afterwards dwelt at the chapel of St. Mary and St. Nicholas in the *torella* of the city wall, by

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the Tower. During the fourteenth century, this place was in the hands of the mayor and aldermen, who granted it to Sir John de Elyngham, chaplain, on condition that he should keep it in repair and protect it against wind and rain. In this document it is described as being near Bishopsgate.

Of the Bishopsgate cell little is known. In 1342 the custody of the king’s hermitage within Bishopsgate was given to John de Warrewyk. Four years later, protection was granted to Robert, hermit of Bishopsgate, who was dependent upon alms.⁵

Another hermitage was situated by St. Katharine’s hospital, near the Tower. It was visited in 1360 by John, the captive King of France, who gave two crowns as alms on Ascension Day, and a fortnight later, attended Mass and offered 12*d.*⁶^[3] This was evidently the place called “le Swannesnest,” where in 1371 John Ingram was hermit. In the same year one Sir Robert was “a recluse monk near the Tower”.

A more rural spot was the hermitage of St. Katharin, on the site now occupied by Charing Cross Post Office. Henry III granted to the Bishop of Llandaff permission to lodge “in the close of the king’s hermitage of La Charryng”. In 1268 he appointed Simon de Bragham to succeed Richard de la

March as chaplain of “The free chapel of the hermitage of la Cherring”. The *Exchequer Roll* of 1272 mentions two chaplains who performed divine service there for the soul of the king’s father. In 1361, a bequest was made to the hermit near charrynge-crouche.

In other parts of the kingdom, too, the “solitary” made his habitation in many frequented places. Lawrence Burgeys (or Abingdon), bailiff of Reading, obtained permission from Abbot Helyas to build a chapel in honour of St. Edmund, beside which he might dwell as a hermit.⁷ This chapel was situated on rising ground nearly opposite the west end of the friary. In a memorial issued against the abbot of Reading in the fifteenth century this allegation was made : “a chapelle at

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the west end of the towne, of Seynt Edmunds, and feyre londs therto, for to have God worshyppyd in that chapelle, wherein lyeth the bonys of many christen people, and now they have made a barne therof, and put therin corne [grain] and hey, and tye therin horse and bests”. When the remains of St. Edmund’s were discovered a few years ago, some stones were removed to the museum at the abbey gateway.

There was a hermitage in the suburbs of Salibury. The bishop licensed the hermit of Fisherton to celebrate divine service in the chapel there, and his office was usurped by a certain layman who assumed clerical dress and pretended to be a hermit. This schismatic person was in the habit of ringing a bell to collect the people in the slums of Fisherton, thus “tempting the people, as Jeroboam did Israel”. Offering years of pardon to those who attended the Mass which he presumed to say, he in this manner deceived the simple and extorted money from them. Bishop Wyvil therefore laid the chapel under an interdict (1352). Bishop Mitford afterwards licensed Thomas, hermit of St. Anne’s chapel, to conduct service, subject to the vicar’s consent. In 1418, the hermit John petitioned that he might be shut up in a confined place at the end of the chapel to lead the stricter life of an anchorite. Bishop Chandler commissioned two of the canons of Salisbury to inquire whether there were any impediment to his complying with this request, and empowered them to perform the ceremony of inclusion if the inquiry proved satisfactory.⁸

Some hermits lived in the heart of the town, and others on the outskirts. At Shrewsbury, for example, there was one at Cadogan’s Cross, and another at Spelcrosse, a waste place on the Meole road. We hear of hermitages at Durham, Leicester, Ely, Colchester, Coventry, Crewkerne, Canterbury, Lydd, Chichester, etc.

There were two cells in the town of Pontefract, and another on the hill of St. Thomas. The series of underground chambers in or under the Back Lane is evidently the place “in a certain lane leading from Malfaygate to the house of the Friars Preachers,” which was granted in 1368 to Brother Adam. The rent paid by the inmates was a white rose at midsummer.

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The grants made to the various hermits of Pontefract are difficult to ascertain. West of the cell founded by the Layrthorps and occupied by Adam and afterwards by the priest Laurence, lay a garden (90 x 30 feet) in which Thomas Elys permitted John de Crayk to build a hermitage ; and eastwards the land belonged to the prior of Nostell, to whom eventually this second hermitage passed. The present garden is surrounded by walls, three of which are ancient. The ground below is a network of cellars, one of which is an oratory and contains a stone altar : another, the dwelling-place, has a hole in the floor for fuel, and a flue cut out of the rock. The inmates obtained water from a clear well, which was reached by a winding staircase. A ground-plan and description of this excavation were prepared for a visit of the Society of Antiquaries, and may be found in the *Proceedings* for 1869.

A solitary used to dwell on the hill near the castle at Pontefract. John of Gaunt permitted William de Byngham to inhabit certain houses by the mount where Thomas, Earl of Lancaster (the popular hero and "saint") had been put to death. These buildings, which were then in a ruinous condition, the tenant agreed to keep up at his own charges. Lord Scrope made a bequest to John the hermit of the hill at Pontefract.

Brandon Hill by Bristol (Plate XXIV), from a fancied resemblance to Mount Calvary, was regarded as a holy place. The summit was in the possession of Tewkesbury Abbey. Probably there was already a cell in 1192, when the place is referred to as "waste land at St. Brendan's". In 1313, Walter, a monk of Garendon, sought permission to lead a solitary life in St. Brendun's[sic] chapel.⁹ Walter de S. Cruce seems, nevertheless, to have remained at Garendon, where he eventually became abbot ; and in 1350 he was translated to be the first Abbot of St. Mary Graces, London, at the invitation of Edward III. At this very time, Lucy de Newchurch, was beseeching the Bishop of Worcester to allow her to be enclosed at that hermitage (p. 91). In 1403, the famous Bishop of Winchester, William of Wykeham, issued letters of indulgence to benefactors of St. Brandan's[sic] chapel, Bristol, or of Reginald



BRANDON HILL, BRISTOL

Plate XXIV : Brandon Hill, Bristol.

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Taillour, a poor hermit there.¹⁰ A later inmate was visited by William Worcester (1480). This hermit told the chronicler that sailors and discreet men declared that the hill-chapel was higher by 18 fathoms than the spire of Redcliffe or any other church. The length of the chapel was about 25 x 15 feet (8½ x 5 *virgas*). The wall enclosing the cell measured 180 steps. The chapel is said to have been frequented by mariners arriving at Bristol port.

In Bristol itself, or rather, in Redcliffe, is the picturesque hermitage shown in Plate XXV. William Worcester describes it as situated on the west side of the church (i.e. the hospital chapel) of St. John, above the river Avon in the red cliff. It stands in the Friends' Cemetery, Jones Lane. The chamber cut in the sandstone is only 9 feet by 8 feet, with an arched doorway and a rough recess which forms a seat. This cell was founded in 1347 by Thomas, Lord Berkeley, who placed there one John Sparkes to pray for him and his family.

Town-hermits often undertook definite employment. There were those, as we have seen, who kept the bridges and roads of Lancaster, Chester, Derby, Doncaster, Northampton, Oxford, Cambridge, Marlborough, etc. Some dwelt by the gates, as at Lynn and Bury St. Edmunds. At Norwich, a hermit used to inhabit a chamber over St. Stephen's Gate, and there were others near most of the gates. According to Blomefield, the hermit of Magdalen Gate presided over the lepers. Such men were sometimes employed by hospitals to gather alms on their behalf. Letters of protection were granted by Edward III to Richard de Breton, hermit of the leper-house at Southbroom outside Devizes, and also to John Trewe, of St. Thomas's hospital by Marlborough. At the end of the town of Bicester (in St. John's, now Sheep Street) there was a hermitage-chapel, of which the hermit, Nicholas Jurdan, obtained permission "to found a hospital for poor and infirm

persons”.¹¹

In two disused Norfolk churches solitaires acted as resident-caretakers. About the time of the Black Death, the Norwich parish of St. Margaret, Newbridge (or Colegate) being depopulated, the monastic patrons converted the church into a hermitage. When St. Giles’s, Thetford, was annexed to

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St. Cuthbert’s, the church was let to a hermit at a yearly rent of 16*d.* The tenant, doubtless, gathered alms for its repair.

In the fifteenth century we still find churchyard-cells. At Sudsbury, a hermitage was built in the churchyard of St. Gregory’s at the cost of the parish, and one John Levynton was dwelling there in 1433. At this time, another townsman, Richard Appelby by name, applied to the bishop to be admitted to the order of hermits, but the bishop declined until he could be assured that the man would dwell “in a solitary place, wher virtues myght increase and vice be exiled”; whereupon the mayor of Sudbury and certain parishioners of St. Gregory’s undertook that Richard should share John’s abode, and they made supplication to the bishop to admit Richard.

In the busy seaport of Sandwich, the hermit seems to have acted as a special chaplain. It was his duty to minister to strangers and the poor, and to pray for the people. His chapel of St. James, near St. Mary’s Church, had a burial-ground, which was afterwards used as the cemetery of the parish. The churchwarden’s accounts for the year 1447 show an expenditure of 12*d.* upon reparation of the chapel. The sum of 4*s.* 11*d.* was paid “for a stone to lay ovyr sir Williem ye herimye withyn seynt Jamys chirchezerd”. The last chaplain, John Steward, who as late as 1538 received a bequest as “Sir John the Heremit,” became vicar of St. Mary’s. The church wardens probably secured his appointment in recognition of his services to the parish. The chapel was destroyed in the time of Edward IV.

Solitaries in towns, and especially in churchyards, usually belonged to the stricture order of anchorites, and to them we must now turn our attention.

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REDCLIFFE HERMITAGE, BRISTOL

Plate XXV : Redcliffe Hermitage, Bristol.

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Footnotes ~

1. Usually hermitage, but *inclusorium* occurs 1253 (Nicholas, Leic., III. Pt. II. 840). In 1265 Richard de Ginges became a *recluse* there.
- [1]. [The hermitage cell comprised a living space and chapel and it functioned like a specialized monastic institution. As such, the king (the crown) held a special kind of authority over them. When an abbey was in need of a new Abbot, for example, whomever was chosen had to be approved by the king. In larger abbeys, as well, the king might have the right to “nominate” or to name certain people to be monks or nuns, up to one or two a year, or in this case, to nominate certain persons to man a hermitage or chapel. Politically, it was important that the King be seen as one who had privilege to bestow privilege. And, despite its difficulties, the job of a monk or priest or

hospital/hermitage chaplain was a secure “job with benefits.” The person who is nominated to the job might expect to enjoy the security of a meal and a bed for the rest of their lives. The king, or local benefactor, might also have the right to require a monastery to house and care for a particularly loyal retainer or servant in their retirement. Local lords would also have some powers to ‘nominate’ persons to be chaplains, parish priests, and/or enter the monastery where their family held influence.]

[2]. Chantries were specific kinds of chapels with a memorial function. Built and endowed by wealthy families, endowments were large enough to employ a priest or chaplain who would perform mass and pray for the souls of their benefactor (benefactress) and those of the benefactor’s family who were deceased. Chantries also housed holy relics of saints—in fact, many times chantries were built specifically to house an important holy relic. Chantries attracted pilgrims who would come to see the memorials of the members of that wealthy family, and make offerings to the relics of which ever saint the chantry was dedicated to. See more about Chantries in my article *Parts of the Church*.]

2. Pap. Let. II. 554.

3. Ex. Reg. *Brantyngham*, I.3.

4. B. M. Seals, LXVIII. I.

5. *Comptes de l’Argenterie* (Soc. de l’Hist. de Fr.), 248, 252.

6. Possibly this cell became the abode of stricter recluses ; cf. “the anchorite within the gate of Bishopsgate on the wall towards Cripplegate,” etc.

[3]. Careful records were kept of the gifts given by important persons to chapels, monasteries, hermitages, and the sacred relics in churches and chantries. A rich gift from a person of high status reflected well on the giver (who was credited as being humble, generous, and devout), and also increased the status of the receiver. Whether or not such gifts were used intentionally as advertising, monastic institutions trumpeted the richest of the gifts their saints and chantries received, and in so doing encouraged (and gained) generous giving from others, as well. For more information about riches and relics, see my transcription of the *Shrines of British Saints*.]

7. B. M. Cott. Vesp. E. V. f. 8I b.

8. Reg. Wyvil, I. f. 210 ; Reg Mitford, f. 115 ; Reg. Chandler, III. f. 5.

9. Reg. *Sede Vac.* (Worc. Hist. S.), 147.

10. Reg. *Wykeham*, Pt. III. f. CCCLVII.

11. *Pat. R.* 1337, 1338, 1340, 1355.

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