

The Abbey Church of Our Lady of the Star

100th anniversary of the reconstruction
of the abbey church (1898-1998)
(1/2)

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I

Its origins

The story of how the Abbey of Our Lady of the Star of Montebourg first came into existence is told in a manuscript kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale (Latin material: N°12,885). The account was written by the monk Denis Clémence in about 1448 at the request of his Abbot, Gilbert Guérin. The document expresses in a definitive form the traditions of the community going back to the 11th century. Here are the main points of the document edited by Fr L. Ca-cheux.

In search of solitude

Towards the middle of the 11th century, two hermits left their native Savoy and came to France. They made their way slowly on foot, begging for their food, and finally arrived on the banks of the Seine. They followed the river down to the sea and, following the shore, they eventually arrived at a small port in the Bessin region called Grandcamp.

When evening fell, the hermits looked for a place to spend the night. It was low tide and nearby there was a moored boat on the beach. One of the hermits lay down in the boat, the other on the sand near the boat. They fell asleep to the murmur of the gentle waves.

Their awakening was as rude as their sleep had been peaceful. The tide had come in, the anchor of the boat had not held, and the small boat had drifted off, carrying with it a much-frightened hermit.

Thanks to a favourable wind, the boat was carried to the shores of England. The people there were very impressed by this wonderful event. The Bishop of Salisbury having recently died, the canons of the cathedral elected in his place the hermit sent to them by heaven in so marvellous a manner. Legend tells us that he became famous for his great virtue.

When Roger, the other hermit, opened his eyes, he found himself alone. The boat was now a great distance away, a white sail on the horizon, being carried off by the wind. He was very concerned about the fate of his companion. He roamed far and wide, begging Our Lord and Our Lady to help him find him, but to no avail. He understood finally that the Lord wanted him to build a shrine to the Mother of God. He prayed for a sign from heaven to show him a suitable place where he could live the monastic life.

One night, overcome by fatigue and fasting, he fell asleep in a forest, on the Museresse, a small hill in Montebourg. He had a very strange dream: a star would show him the place chosen by the Blessed Virgin to be venerated for centuries to come.

Waking up from his deep sleep, Roger began to pray. All was silent, when suddenly he saw a flash of light, like a star, which fell from the sky and, striking the ground, set fire to the undergrowth of this desolate place. Fearing that he was prey to some illusion, but filled with great hope, Roger quickly went down the hill. The fire which had come down from heaven had completely burnt all the bushes and briars over a large area, clearing it for the construction of the shrine.

Thanking God for bringing his journeys to an end, he set about building his hermitage and a small chapel dedicated to Our Lady. Local people and travellers helped him in his work. This chapel was the modest predecessor of the Abbey of Our Lady of the Star. This was not the end of the story, however: providence had other surprises in store for the hermit.

William the Conqueror, the first benefactor of the Abbey.

News of the prodigy spread throughout the region and came to the ears of William, King of England, who was staying at Cherbourg at the time. Wishing to ascertain the truth of the marvellous things that had happened, he sent his doctor, a native of Savoy, to Montebourg. The doctor proved to be Roger's brother. After giving thanks to God, Roger heard what had happened to his fellow hermit and how he had become bishop of Salisbury.

Duke William was a generous benefactor. He gave the new abbey the whole Montebourg area and all that went with it: mills, fairs, markets, total jurisdiction, exemption from taxes, rights over surrounding forests and a great deal of income from the Cotentin peninsula and the islands. The charter confirming this gift was signed by the Duke and the principal bishops of England. Subsequently, William's successors confirmed the charter and continued to shower gifts on the Abbey. Numerous privileges were granted the Abbey by successive Popes.

Roger was the first abbot. He was joined by numerous other monks and adopted the Rule of St Benedict. He it was who began the construction of the abbey and its church. He died with a reputation for great virtue. He was buried in a small sarcophagus in the chapter room crypt in front of the statue of the merciful Virgin Mary, commonly called Our Lady of the Star.

The present-day monastery continues to be dedicated to the immaculate Virgin, who has been pleased to grant it many favours. This, then, is the story of the origin of Our Lady of the Star.

It is difficult nowadays to disentangle what is historical in this story and what has been embellished by legend. According to Robert de Torigny, the best of the Norman historians of the Middle Ages, and the "Gallia Christiana" of the Benedictines, who share his views, Roger was a monk of the La Croix Saint Leufroy monastery in the Évreux diocese.

It is not possible either to determine the exact date when he arrived at Montebourg. All historians are agreed, however, that the small community became an abbey in about 1080, before the death of William the Conqueror. If, at present, for lack of documentary evidence, it cannot be said that William was the founder of the abbey, it is certain

that he was its first benefactor, for his gifts are recorded in the charters of his successors: William Rufus, Henry I, Stephen, Henry II.

In 1100, Roger the first abbot was succeeded by Urson, sub-prior of Jumièges, who gave the monastery its definitive Rule.

Richard de Reviere, the cousin of William the Conqueror, Lord of Vernon and Nêhou, Constable of England was the principal benefactor. He can, perhaps, be called the second founder of the abbey in which he wished to be buried.

II

The history of the abbey from its origins to the French Revolution

There are very few archival documents that survived the looting which accompanied the wars of religion, the Revolution and the fires of 1944. Those that have survived, however, have provided and continue to provide researchers with much valuable information.

The consecration of the abbey church in 1152

Some 100 years after the arrival of Roger the hermit, the abbey church, which had become one of the wonders of the Cotentin peninsula, was solemnly consecrated, with the title of Holy Mary of Montebourg, by Hugues, Archbishop of Rouen, assisted by the Bishops of Coutances and Évreux. At the offertory, Henry II, the future King of England, placed on the altar the charter of confirmation and, imitated by the lords who accompanied him, enriched the monastery with more gifts.

Its influence in the Middle Ages

The Kings of England Henry I, Stephen, Henry II, Henry V, Edward III, and the Kings of France St Louis, Philippe III, considered it to be a great privilege to shower their royal gifts on the monastery. This monastery was the largest in the Cotentin peninsula. By 1157, it owned 16 churches only in the diocese of Coutances, and the jurisdiction of its abbot extended to a 100 or so parishes. Its influence was no less great in England.

A century later, there were 31 priest-monks resident in the abbey, 8 others in the 4 priories it owned in Normandy, England and the Isle of Sark.

The abbey appears to have been quite an active centre of studies. Montebourg was the origin of the famous 13th century Oxford Psalter, which served as the basis for the Francisque Michel edition, and of the 14th century Manuscript 529 of Ludewig which contains the chronicle of Bernard Gui. The Bibliothèque Nationale possesses a fragment of the Annals composed at Montebourg (Latin material N° 17,177).

Léopold Delisle, an eminent historian, notes that, serfdom having been almost completely abolished in the area, the situation of the peasants in Normandy in the 12th and 13th centuries was quite good, and possibly even better than in the 19th century. According to Michel Sauvage, the great abbays were both great churches and great land owners. Be-

ginning as a spiritual focal point, they became the springboard for an economic unit.

Faithful to the great traditions of their Order, the Benedictines of Montebourg devoted themselves to prayer, good works, and manual and intellectual work. Their abbey rapidly became an active agricultural centre whose working methods and variety of produce contributed to the improvement of the soil, the liberation of the peasant class and the enrichment of the region. It is said that present-day Norman cattle are descended from the abbey's herds. This period was undoubtedly very strongly marked by the development of Montebourg and the importance of its fairs and markets.

Trial

Wars always bring with them destruction and ruin. On July 10th 1340, Henry III, King of England, landed at St Vaast la Hougue, looted the abbey and set fire to it. Later it became the headquarters of the soldiers of Godefroy d'Har-court, the treacherous Vicomte de St Sauveur.

In 1378, Du Guesclin garrisoned his troops there. In 1405, the abbey was looted again, this time by the Duke of Lancaster. The abbot Petrus as a good Norman lawyer negotiated with the King of France and Charles the Bad to save the goods of the abbey.

Guillaume Guérin, the 23rd abbot, rebuilt the abbey on the ruins left by the 100 Years War. On January 24th 1451 he swore allegiance to the King of France and ordered the reconstitution of the chartulary.

A period of commendatory abbots resulted in laxity in monasteries. All the same, the first of these abbots at Montebourg, Cardinal d'Estouville (1469) did much to embellish the abbey church.

The Wars of Religion speeded up the destruction of the monasteries. On June 14th 1562, two thousand Huguenots attacked the abbey, broke up its altars, pulpits and benches, stole the linen and vestments, and the bed-linen and food. They stole all the locks and dishes, horses and their harness. Finally, they drove four cartloads of hay into the abbey church in order to burn the wooden statues. In addition, the looting and almost complete destruction of the charter-room and library resulted in the loss of all property rights documents and reduced the monks to penury for many years.

While the commendatory abbots gradually recovered some of their lost wealth (by the 18th century their income amounted to some 20,000 livres), monastery life fell more and more into decadence. By 1773, there was only one monk left, a certain Claude Jacquelin. In 1778, Mgr Talaru de Chalmazel, Bishop of Coutance and last commendatory abbot, obtained permission from the Council of State to secularise the monastery and turn it into a retirement home for the sick priests of the diocese.

The French Revolution brought with it the definitive ruin of the abbey: it was sold as State property. After serving as a store for cattle fodder, the church was used as a source of building material for new constructions. On February 18th 1818, the new owner of the abbey ruins lit the fuses of the explosives he had placed at the foot of the columns. The church tower and the rest of the church, built to withstand the centuries, collapsed only four days later.

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