

# Dame Elizabeth Shelley, Last Abbess of St. Mary's Abbey, Winchester

by JOHN PAUL

## I

THE important Benedictine nunnery of St Mary, the Nuns' minster or Nunnaminster, was founded by Alfred the Great's wife, Eahlswith, at the end of the 9th century on a site near the centre of Winchester.<sup>1</sup> Alfred's son, Edward the Elder, completed the building, and after Alfred's death, Eahlswith spent the rest of her days in the new abbey. She may even have been appointed as abbess, but according to Leland, the antiquary, it was Edburga, Edward's daughter, who became the first abbess.

Nunnaminster was the earliest of three important religious houses for women to be established in Hampshire. With the creation of the large house of Romsey in about 907 and that of Wherwell in approximately 986, the establishment of Nunnaminster exemplified the predilection of early royal founders for the spread of monastic life as a religious and civilising influence in the kingdom of Wessex. In the century after its foundation, the nunnery seems to have been stricken by poverty, a misfortune which was to recur in its career, but which was not peculiar to its own long history. Rather than the fact of Nunnaminster's poverty, however, it was Bishop Ethelwold's desire of introducing stricter discipline in religious life which prompted him almost to re-found and re-endow the nunnery in 963. Ethelwold had been a monk at Glastonbury with Dunstan and it was through Dunstan's influence that he was eventually made Bishop of Winchester.<sup>2</sup> Acutely aware of the deterioration of English monastic life, which fell much below the monastic standards of the influential abbeys of Northern France and Flanders, it was the new Bishop who resolved upon an improvement of the religious and moral status of the monks in his large and important diocese. Acting generally with considerable severity, his thorough measures achieved their object; and not only was Nunnaminster re-founded, but also the Old Minster (forerunner of the Cathedral Priory) was re-constituted as a Benedictine monastic community, the lax seculars being turned out or, at least, those among them dismissed who declined to accept the monastic habit.

Like all religious houses, St Mary's had its varied difficulties and changes of fortune in the succeeding centuries. During the civil war in Stephen's reign the abbey was burnt with many other churches in the ancient capital by Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester. Records of its later history are rather meagre, but there is evidence that poverty continued to be an embarrassment to the community, and we find that there is a complaint to the Pope about it in 1343 and again in 1346. The effect of the Great Pestilence and that of the cattle plague which followed was serious, since they resulted in much reduced rents from Nunnaminster's lands, the unproductiveness of which was caused by scarce and expensive labour. All this formed the subject of a further appeal to the Pope in 1352 for the appropriation of the church of Gretford in Lincolnshire—an appeal which succeeded, for Gretford was still among the nunnery's properties mentioned at the Suppression Commissioners' visitation in 1536.<sup>3</sup>

1. Carpenter Turner, B, *Churches of Mediaeval Winchester* (Winchester, 1957), p. 37. The remaining early historical facts are based on details in V.C.H. 2, p. 116 and p. 122 *et seq.*

2. D.N.B.: *Ethelwold*.

3. V.C.H., p. 123; P.R.O. E315/400 f. 24 *et seq.*

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St Mary's, associated with the royal house in its earliest days, may, in the members of its community, have been distinguished by a note of gentle breeding throughout its long life. This distinction was, to some extent, possibly derived from the Crown's exercise of the right of nominating a nun to the abbey at each coronation. It certainly seems to have been found there during the convent's last years and, significantly, among a large number of aristocratic children being educated there, were two girls of Plantagenet origin.

The community was not small in size, since in 1536 it numbered 26 nuns and 13 lay sisters, but, probably on account of the considerable amount of education which the convent undertook, the household itself was a large one. An important feature of the nunnery was the presence of as many as five chaplains, who did not, of course, form part of the monastic community.<sup>4</sup> These chaplains may have been necessary to assist the Abbess or her subordinate officers in managing the community's temporal affairs.<sup>5</sup> One acted as confessor, and all probably lived in common in the convent.

Nunnaminster, although an influential house, was only of moderate wealth. The *Valor* of 1535 gives the annual value as £245, with a net yearly value of £179, but, as will later be explained, these figures were a considerable understatement. At the time of the intended suppression in 1536 the value of the lands and possessions was given as some £330, and the value of the woods, which seem to have constituted a considerable proportion of the total real property, was as much as £231.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the church of Gretford in Lincolnshire, the convent owned some seven manors—Erchefountt (which included 'a great wood of oaks' of 100 acres) and All Cannings in Wiltshire, and five in Hampshire, of which the most valuable was possibly Froyle.

Froyle had long been associated with the wool trade and for centuries the productiveness of the old native textile industry of Hampshire had been nourished by the wool which came from the flocks of sheep reared extensively on the Downs.<sup>7</sup> The sheep industry was of considerable significance in the county as early as the 13th century, and we learn that the fleeces of sheep from Froyle in 1241 reached a total of 837.<sup>8</sup> 'Large wool' was a special feature of the fleeces, and the Abbess of St Mary's obtained from the flocks five weys valued at the fairly considerable sum of £8 6s. 8d. in the tenth year of her rule, about the middle of the 13th century.<sup>9</sup> When, in later years, the enclosure movement gained impetus and the manor of Froyle possibly became involved in it, the value of the wool produced would have been considerably enhanced.

Nunnaminster with its church and associated buildings was no doubt a worthy external memorial to its royal founders and patrons, the church itself being probably more exquisite and majestic than the elegantly symmetrical abbey of Romsey, still today in a fine condition of preservation. The Commissioners of 1536 described the convent as being in a 'very good state of reparation, standing nigh the middle of the city and of a great and large compass'.<sup>10</sup> The neighbourhood was filled 'with many poor households which have their only living of the said monastery. And have no demesnes whereby they may make any provision, but live only by their hands, making their provision in the markets'. These 'poor households' must

4. E315/400, f. 24 *et seq.*

5. V.C.H. 2, p. 122.

6. E315/400, f. 24 *et seq.*

7. V.C.H. 5, p. 475.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. E315/400 f. 24 *et seq.*

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have found the fair of St Giles on St Giles' Hill overlooking the city a source of profit for their wares and labours. The Fair, which originated in a grant from William Rufus and became one of the great fairs of the country, was at first prescribed for the vigil, feast and morrow of St Giles, but its subsequent normal term of sixteen days could be extended on occasions by specific grants to as much as 24 days.<sup>11</sup> 'Overspill', so to say, of people from the Fair must have sometimes proved a source of irritation, and perhaps of trouble, to the cloistered nuns, since Nunnaminster was situated not far from the scene of business and gaiety.

Nothing remains of the abbey church. That it was of surpassing splendour is clear from the testimony of Camden, writing at the beginning of the 17th century. There were, he says, many noble buildings in the city of Winchester, but 'time has destroyed them, though I cannot but take notice of the nunnery, founded by Aelfwide [sic], wife to King Alfred, it having been so noble a pile (as the ruins of it still show)'.<sup>12</sup> Had Winchester not been a city of so many churches, Nunnaminster might, like her sister of Romsey, have been spared to serve as a noble parish church after the Dissolution, but it went the way of so many abbeys. A simple plaque on the wall of a building overlooking pleasant, trim gardens bears witness to the fact that there was once lived on the spot a hallowed life of piety and peace.

Although destruction at St Mary's was more complete than at many other religious houses, it is possible to form some idea of the extent of the abbey buildings and of the precincts from evidence in contemporary documents. The Abbess's lodging stretched from the church, which was, presumably, orientated, to the frater north and south, with associated 'houses of offices', such as the buttery, pantry, kitchen and larder.<sup>13</sup> Other abbatial buildings were the gatehouse, the barn, the baking and brewing houses, with 'the garner next to them', the stable and the mill.<sup>14</sup> The abbey mill, a substantial possession, considered useful at the time to the Crown, was preserved and is still in existence, whilst at the south-eastern end of the High Street side of the precinct there was another mill, the Posterne Mill of the abbey of Wintney. Near this mill and over the High Street stream was Newbridge which St Mary's maintained. There seem to have been two garners on the south side of the courtyard, whilst the remaining buildings included 'Mistress Lane's lodging' (the identity of Mistress Lane is unknown), the priests' lodgings and the plumber's house.<sup>15</sup> All these properties were committed at the Dissolution to the custody of William Lambert, gentleman, who, in particular, had charge of the abbey's strong house.<sup>16</sup> A definite stage in the subsequent ownership of the properties seems to have been reached in Queen Mary's reign, for we learn that, because the city of Winchester 'is in great decay and lamentable ruin', and because the manor and commonalty had sustained great costs on account of the marriage of the Queen to Philip II, the city was granted 'lands formerly belonging to the late monastery of St Mary'.<sup>17</sup>

So far as the abbey precincts are concerned, it is probable that the present Abbey Passage represents a cut-through at the west end of the church similar to the passages which developed at the western ends of the churches of St Maurice and St Laurence and at the Cathedral. Also within the precincts to the east were the church of St Peter Colebrook, and, rather

11. V.C.H. 5, pp. 36, 38.

12. Camden, Wm., *Britannia* (1772) I, p. 216.

13. P.R.O. E315/494, p. 13 *et seq.* The writer is most grateful to Mrs. Carpenter Turner for valuable suggestions about the lay-out of the convent buildings and the precinct.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Cal. Pat. Rolls, Philip & Mary, 1554-55, pp. 186, 187.

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to the north-east in the middle of what is now the Broadway, the Sintern Hospital, which housed a small number of poor women, all called 'sisters', whom the nunnery maintained. The Sintern declined into a very squalid tenement after the Dissolution and eventually became the City Bridewell. The building was demolished *circa* 1790 by agreement with Thomas Weld the owner of Abbey House (built, of course, on part of the site of St. Mary's Abbey). Thomas Weld was the head of an old and distinguished Catholic family, of Lulworth Castle, Dorset, and his generosity enabled Abbey House to come into the possession of some Franciscan nuns in 1794.<sup>18</sup> The nuns continued more than one of Nunnaminster's useful functions, and, in particular, over two and a half centuries after the Dissolution, they conducted a boarding school of their own till 1808, removing to Taunton in that year.

Finally, Inkpen's Charnel Chapel of the Holy Trinity should be mentioned as being within the abbey precincts in the 'Broadway' part. Founded in 1318 by Roger de Inkpenne, member of a wealthy Winchester family, the chapel served as a 'bone-house' for St Mary's. But it was a chapel and not a parish church.<sup>19</sup> Camden gives a short account of it: 'There is a fair chapel on the north side of St Mary Abbey Church, in an area thereby to which men enter by certain steps; under it is a vault that is for a carniarie [charnel house]. One Inkpen was founder of it; there be three marble tombs of priests custodes of this chapel'.<sup>20</sup> After the Dissolution, the family of Inkpen were still associated with the charnel house, for in Edward VI's reign, 'Master Inkpen' is described 'as the last Master of the said house' and he had received sums of 36s. 5d. and 8s. 2d. from the mayor 'because he was a young student at Oxford'.<sup>21</sup>

## II

Dame Elizabeth Shelley, last Abbess of Nunnaminster, was elected to that position in June 1527, on the death of Abbess Joan Legh.<sup>22</sup> The new Abbess was the daughter of John Shelley and Elizabeth Michelgrove, of Michelgrove, Sussex, both of whom were members of ancient Sussex families.<sup>23</sup> Their own large family included the eldest son, Sir John Shelley, Knight of Rhodes, and the second son, Sir William Shelley, made a Judge of the Common Pleas by Henry VIII. Sir William was the most distinguished of the Abbess's six brothers. He was on friendly terms with the King, for his son, Sir Richard Shelley, writing to Lord Burleigh many years later, in 1582, said that Henry VIII loved his father in his youth very well.<sup>24</sup> 'In my Lord Cromwell's time', said Sir Richard, 'he passed terms, and with great loss . . . yet finally the King made much of him again, and vouchsafed to tell me at Deptford . . . of the great cheer he had at Michelgrove, with great commendation of my father's uprightness'. This friendship with the King, as will be seen, was possibly to stand his sister, the Abbess, in good stead at a critical stage of her religious life.

Sir William Shelley, like all the Shelley family, was on the side of the religious conservatives, and in Elizabethan days his own family, settled at the manor of Mapledurham near Petersfield, which he had bought in 1533,<sup>25</sup> were pronounced Catholic recusants, whilst there

18. Gillow, J., *Biog. Dict. of the Eng. Catholics*, Vol. 5, p. 576 and *Cath. Rec. Socy*, 42, p. 13.

19. Carpenter Turner, B., *op. cit.*, p. 33.

20. Camden, *Britannia* (1789), Vol. I, p. 136.

21. P.R.O. E315/115, f. 102.

22. L. & P. 4 (2), 3133 and 3182.

23. Harl. Soc. 64; Harl. MSS 1139, f. 26; B. M. Add. MSS 5711; Letters of Sir Thomas Copley (Roxburgh Club); Sussex Visitations.

24. Letters of Sir Richard Shelley (1774), p. 15.

25. V.C.H. 3, pp. 88, 89.

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was an appreciable number of priests and nuns among his descendants. His younger brother, Edward, furnished a Catholic martyr-son, Edward, in the year of the Armada, 1588. This collateral line of the Shelleys, beginning in Catholicism and martyrdom, was to produce, in direct descent, at the end of the eighteenth century, scepticism and poetry in Percy Bysshe Shelley.<sup>26</sup>

Nunnaminster, cloistered Benedictine community though it was, housed some twenty-six 'children of lords, knights and gentlemen' who were there to be educated.<sup>27</sup> This was perhaps something more than the common practice to which Robert Aske referred when he spoke of the daughters of gentlemen 'brought up in virtue in the nunneries',<sup>28</sup> for it seems to have been of the nature of a boarding school. Management of so many children was a responsible task not only for the Abbess but also for her nuns. It involved thoughtful catering, repair of clothes, provision of books, accounting details, correspondence with solicitous parents, vigilance and care at times of illness, all apart from the prime need of advancement in religion, learning and courtesy. There were found at St Mary's in 1536 such children as Mary Pole, daughter of Sir Geoffrey Pole and therefore granddaughter of Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, niece of Edward IV. Margaret Pole, with most of her harrowing troubles still before her, and living either at Christchurch or at the eastern end of the county at Warblington, was probably well acquainted with the Abbess. There was Bridget Copley, daughter of Sir Roger Copley of Roughey, Sussex, who eventually married Richard Southwell of Hortham St Faith in Norfolk, and became the mother of Robert Southwell, the Jesuit martyr and poet.<sup>29</sup> And there were members of distinguished Hampshire families like Elizabeth Phyllpot, daughter of Sir Peter Phyllpot, and sister of John Phyllpot, Archdeacon of Winchester, Protestant martyr in 1555; four Dingleys, Amy, Elizabeth, Jane and Frances, from whose family a few years later, in 1539, came a Catholic martyr, Thomas Dingley; and there were members of the ancient Tichborne family, Susan and Elizabeth Tichborne. But the most prominent of all the children, and concerning whom we know most during her stay at Nunnaminster, was Lady Bridget Plantagenet, daughter of Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle, a natural son of Edward IV, and Governor of Calais at this time. His second wife, Honor, was Bridget's stepmother. Frequent correspondence took place between the Abbess and Lady Lisle, correspondence of marked feminine interest, revealing details of the care which was being given to this socially, and perhaps politically, important child.

It would appear from a letter which Elizabeth Shelley wrote to Lady Lisle probably on 26th February 1535, that Bridget Plantagenet entered the convent in July 1533.<sup>30</sup> The Abbess tells Lady Lisle that Bridget is in good health, but lacks 'convenient apparel', for she has 'neither whole gown nor kirtle but the gown and kirtle that you sent her last'. She is also without good 'pertelett' (partlet or ruff) to put about her neck and only one good coif to put upon her head. Will, therefore, her Ladyship send as soon as convenient such apparel as she lacketh? Dame Elizabeth also says that she has received in all since Mistress Bridget came to St. Mary's seventy shillings for her maintenance. For the mending of her gowns, for two Matins books, three pairs of hosen, four pairs of gloves and other small things, the Abbess has laid out the sum of 3s. 5d.

26. Foss, E., *Biog. Dict. of Judges* (1870), p. 611.

27. E315/400, f. 24.

28. *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, 12 (1), 901 (2).

29. *Harl. Soc.* 64, p. 7, and *D.N.B.*: *Robert Southwell*.

30. *Lisle Papers*, SP 3/43 f. 104.

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John Perpownte, the curate of Subberton (Soberton, near Bishop's Waltham), which was Lord Lisle's place in Hampshire, and Edward Russell, Lady Lisle's agent, both write<sup>31</sup> to Lady Lisle later in 1535, giving her news of Mistress Bridget and also of Master George Bassett, her step-brother, who was in the care of the Benedictine Prior of Hyde, Winchester, as his brother, James Bassett, was in the care of Abbot Hugh Faringdon of Reading. Lady Bridget, says the curate, is 'merry'. The two writers had visited Master George and both had 'judged him very well and profiting in his learning'. Mistress Bridget's apparel had duly been delivered 'as appeareth by your Ladyship's bill, of which nothing lacked'. The Lady Abbess intends to make some clothes for Bridget: 'two kirtles of her camelet and damask gowns and of her (? 'another') velvet gown which will no wise be mended, it is sheer perished upon the pleats'.<sup>32</sup>

In the summer of (probably) 1535 Lady Lisle sent the Abbess some gifts, a side of venison and two dozen and a half of 'pewetes' (peewits), and, later in the year, Dame Elizabeth, when acknowledging the gifts, says that, though she has received Mistress Bridget's tawny velvet gown, she is without her 'armyn' (ermine) cap.<sup>33</sup> She has sent Lady Lisle her daughter's black velvet gown and has 'caused kirtles to be made of her old gowns according unto your writing'.

We take final leave of Bridget Plantagenet in September 1536, some four months after the King's Suppression Commissioners visited Nunnaminster.<sup>34</sup> The Abbess writes to Lady Lisle on the 21st of the month that fourteen or fifteen days before Michaelmas, Mistress Waynam and Mistress Fawkenor came to St Mary's with two servants, asking that Lady Bridget might visit Sir Anthony Windsor, Lady Lisle's steward at Subberton, in order 'to sport her for a week'.<sup>35</sup> The child was 'out of apparel', and, that 'Master Windsor might see her', says Dame Elizabeth, 'I was the better content to let her go'. Since that time, however, she has come no more to Winchester. The Abbess besought Lady Lisle 'to think no unkindness in me for my light sending of her off. If I had not esteemed her to have come again she should not have come there at that time'.

Sir Anthony Windsor seems to be in something of a dilemma and writes to Lady Lisle asking what should be done with the Lady Bridget.<sup>36</sup> She is now at home with him and he will provide for her apparel such things as shall be necessary, for she had grown out of all her clothes, except those which she had had of late. Mistress Bridget seems, indeed, to have considerably outgrown her strength, for, says Sir Anthony, he intends to keep her with him until he has more instructions: 'she shall fare no worse than I do, for she is very spare and hath need of cherishing'. Nothing, 'in learning nor otherwise that my wife can do for her', will she lack.

Lady Bridget subsequently went to Calais with her mother. She became involved in the business relating to the attainder of her father in 1540, and, perhaps as a political safeguard, the King kept her in custody, though she was quite innocent.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, Lord Lisle was proved to be guiltless, and, soon after 1542, his daughter, having returned to England, married Sir William Carden.

31. SP3/13 ff. 49, 82. Both letters seem wrongly calendared in L & P, 10 (1536).

32. L & P, 10, 1149; SP3/13, f. 82.

33. SP3/13 f. 105.

34. E315/400.

35. SP3/13, f. 106.

36. SP3/8, f. 78.

37. Wood, M. A. E., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*, 2, p. 128.

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### III

1536 was the year in which the suppression of the lesser religious houses began. The 1535 *Valor* figure of £179 annual value brought St Mary's well within the financial limit (under £200 a year) prescribed for dissolution. But when the Suppression Commissioners visited the Abbey in May 1536, the annual income was found to be some £330.<sup>38</sup> The return of 1535, thus giving rise to a difference of £150, constituted, as Professor Knowles says, a serious fraud, but as it 'had the unforeseen effect of putting the nunnery into the class of smaller houses liable to be suppressed . . . it was, from the governmental point of view, a happy fault and went unpunished'.<sup>38a</sup> The lay officials of the abbey, who must have understood the varied financial intricacies, were probably responsible for this gross under-statement of the income, and what the Commissioners said about the matter in their report seems to be significant: they gave the precise annual value as £330 18s. 6½d and added, 'with £150 concealed upon taxation of the tenths [taxation which was based on the *Valor* figure] *without the consent of the abbess and convent as is confessed*'.<sup>38b</sup>

Besides enquiring into the abbey's economy, the Suppression Commissioners investigated its religious condition. The report was eminently satisfactory.<sup>39</sup> The nuns 'have been and been ('bene') of very clean, virtuous and charitable order and rule, sithen the first profession of them'. This confirms the excellent condition of the nunnery thirty-five years previously, in March, 1501, when Prior Thomas of Christ Church, Canterbury, appointed Dr Thomas Hede to act as visitor both of St Mary's and the Cathedral Priory at Winchester. All was then well in the convent: the nuns rose for Matins, the Abbess, Joan Legh, duly rendered accounts before the assembled community in the chapter-house, the convent seal was carefully guarded, the house was not in debt nor had the buildings deteriorated in the time of the Abbess.<sup>40</sup>

In 1536 there was a total establishment at Nunnaminster of 102 persons, who included twenty-six religious, all but four of whom were 'professed', five priests, as we have seen, thirteen lay sisters, nine women 'sisters', twenty officials and servants, and, of course, the twenty-six children. The Abbess had a 'gentyllwoman', Jane Shirley, as well as a servant, and also her own 'lavender' or washerwoman, Alys Strong; whilst the Prioress, Sub-Prioress and the Sexton each had a servant in their respective houses, as did one of the ordinary nuns, Dame Mawde Bruyne or Brune, 'in her house'. There were two 'lavenders' for the convent.<sup>41</sup>

The more important lay officials of St Mary's included Thomas Legh, the Receiver, and Thomas Tichbourne, the Clerk, each of whom had a servant. Thomas Legh's sister, Margaret, was a sexton at the convent, and in his will, dated 9 September 1537, he left 5s. 0d. to her, as well as the sum of 30s. 0d. 'to the religious women of the monastery of St Mary's'.<sup>42</sup> Thomas's daughter, Jane, married William Lambert, who was presumably the person to whom the abbey's buildings were entrusted at the Dissolution and who had charge of the strong house.<sup>43</sup> Both Thomas and Margaret were no doubt of the same family as the Abbess

38. P.R.O. SC12/33/27, M.I.

38a. Knowles, Dom David, *The Religious Orders in England*, III (C.U.P. 1959), pp. 244, N.3.

38b. S.C.12/33/27. *Italics mine*.

39. *Ibid.*; S.C.12/33/27, M.I. certificate, 30 May 1536.

40. Reg. R., Chapt. Arch., Chapter Lib. Cant., ff. 115v-116r.

41. E315/400.

42. Unclassified wills, County Record Office, Winchester.

43. *Ibid.*

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of 1501, Joan Legh. The Tichbornes were represented by another member of this ancient family, Peter Tichborne, described as a 'child of the high altar', who doubtless served the priests' masses and may have been in the convent to be educated. He married in due course, becoming a noted recusant, like almost all of the prolific Tichbornes, and the father of Chideock Tichborne, friend of Anthony Babington and his fellow-conspirator, executed with him in 1586.<sup>44</sup>

Nunnaminster, like most other religious houses, was a fairly self-contained establishment. It had a butler, a cook and a 'convent' cook, an undercook and a 'convent' undercook, a brewer, a miller, a porter, underporter and a 'porter of Eastgate', the abbey having been responsible for the maintenance of this gate till the Dissolution.<sup>45</sup>

The Commissioners of 1536 declared that 'the church and mansion with all the houses of large circuit been [were] in very good estate and in all things well repaired'.<sup>46</sup> The lead and bells were estimated to be worth some £162; the value of the plate and jewels was some £371; 'stuff' was valued at £27, whilst stock and stores came to the relatively large sum of £324. Debts owing to the house amounted to some £24.

Such, in brief, was the state of Nunnaminster in 1536. The community were undoubtedly distinguished for their virtue and piety, but the resources for comforts in their virtuous living were obviously not inconsiderable. It is, for instance, significant that for twenty-six religious there were thirteen lay sisters and a large staff of servants. The more important nun-officials had their own houses and servants, and even one nun who was not burdened with monastic office had her own dwelling and a servant, the precise reason for which, however, does not emerge; whilst it would seem that the nuns carried into the convent the aura and status of their gentle provenance. What, in any case, seems to be exemplified at Nunnaminster is that steady increase during past centuries of comforts in the form of private accommodation and other amenities at many monastic houses, an increase which was capable of depressing the essential quality of religious life.<sup>47</sup> The absence of pronounced simplicity in certain directions at St Mary's would not perhaps have met with the approval of the reforming Bishop Ethelwold, nor did it seem to accord with the spirit of St Benedict's Rule.

On the other hand, the existence of some special advantages at Nunnaminster cannot be held in derogation of Dame Shelley. It was, in fact, a reflection of that general advance in civilised living which had long been taking place,<sup>48</sup> and in this respect St Mary's was no different from many other religious houses. That the religious position at the convent was so satisfactory, despite the existence of material advantages, and that all the community except one nun wished in 1536 to continue in religion, is a tribute to the high character and good government of the Abbess, and to the essential spirituality of the nuns whom she ruled. Moreover, Nunnaminster was partly of the nature of a high-class boarding school and this must have called for something more in the form of amenities than the ordinary needs of a monastic community. In addition, there is evidence of the performance of much charitable work, for the Commissioners recorded 'the great relief daily ministered unto the poor inhabitants of the said city';<sup>49</sup> whilst there were the twelve poor women in the Sistrin Hospital

44. Harl. Soc. 64, pp. 125, 126; Cath. Rec. Soc. I, p. 69.

45. SC12/33/27 MI; Carpenter Turner, B., *op. cit.*, p. 26.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Knowles, M. D., *Religious Orders in England*, II, p. 360 *et seq.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. SC12/33/27, M.I.



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of whom the convent took care. Each of them received the sum of 6s. 8d. at the nunnery's final dissolution.<sup>50</sup>

It was expected in some quarters that St Mary's would go the way of many other religious houses in 1536 and fall irrevocably to the Crown. On 4 June 1536, for example, John Husee, the agent and indefatigable correspondent of Lord Lisle, wrote to his master, while the Lady Bridget was still at the convent, about the prospects of possessing one of the abbeys which were falling or due to fall.<sup>51</sup> It would, he says, be time lost to sue for Beaulieu, but if his Lordship 'would name one or two in Hampshire or Wiltshire, I have no fear the King would soon know your mind. St Mary's in Winchester, I am told, unless great friendship stay it, is like to be of the number', and he was informed that Waverley was 'a pretty thing'. So far, however, as Nunnaminster was concerned, there seems to have been a movement for its continuance. The excellent reputation of the convent was, indeed, reported upon at this time not only by the mayor and commonalty of the city, but also 'by the most worshipful and honest persons of the county adjoining thereunto which have daily made a continual suit unto the said commissioners to be suitors unto the King's Highness for toleration [that is, non-suppression] of the monastery'.<sup>52</sup> Such 'continual suit' strengthened the representations which the Abbess's influential brother, Sir William Shelley, and her powerful friends most probably made at this time to the King. In addition, it may have been the educational value of Nunnaminster for the aristocratic children there which helped to stay the King's hand.

The Abbey, in the event, was given a respite. On 27 August 1536 it was re-founded by Letters Patent,<sup>53</sup> but Dame Elizabeth had to pay the royal price. The convent lost its manors of Erchefounte and Allcannins in Wiltshire, with their rectories, all the property being granted to Sir Edward Seymour, the King's brother-in-law, whilst the enormous fine of £333 6s. 8d. was exacted for the needy royal coffers.<sup>54</sup>

The convent apparently remained without disturbance for over two years, but in September 1538 there was cause for alarm. On the 21st of that month the King's Commissioners wrote to Cromwell that they had made an end of the great shrine at the Cathedral Priory at Winchester.<sup>55</sup> Which done, they go on to say, 'we intend at Hyde [Hyde Abbey] and St Mary's to sweep away all the bones that be called relics, lest it should be thought that we came more for the treasure than for abomination of idolatry'. As the spoil from the Cathedral Priory including that from St Swithin's shrine eventually amounted to a total of 1035 oz. of gold, 13,886 oz. of silver gilt plate and 300 oz. of silver and parcel gilt,<sup>56</sup> comment on the Commissioners' alleged motive seems superfluous. It is not known what amount of treasure was obtained from St Mary's, but when the convent was suppressed no jewels were found there, whilst the amount of 'plate of silver' then totalled 118 oz. and 'ornaments, goods and chattels' were sold for some £69.<sup>57</sup>

50. E315/494, ff. 11-15; in 1536 there were nine 'poor sisters' (E315/400).

51. L & P. 10, 1058.

52. E315/400.

53. Pat. Roll. Henry VIII, pt. 2 m 14.

54. L & P. 10, 1256 (6) ; L & P 13 (2), 457.

55. L & P 13 (2) 401.

56. Abbotsford Club, *Monastic Treasures* (Edin. 1836), p. 41.

57. 315/494, ff. 11-15.

## DAME ELIZABETH SHELLEY

Nunnaminster survived almost till the last few of the abbeys were dissolved. On 15 November 1539, the day on which the Abbot of Glastonbury was executed, Dame Elizabeth Shelley surrendered her royal house to the King.<sup>58</sup> She was granted the very modest pension of £26 13s. 4d. the Prioress getting £5, the sub-Prioress £4 and the Sexton £3 6s. 8d.<sup>59</sup> Most of the nuns obtained 53s. 4d., but Faith Welbecke, the only nun who had wished for a 'capacity', got a little more, 66s. 8d. In addition, all the religious received a 'reward' of 40s.

The Abbess's lodging and all the 'houses of office', such as the buttery, pantry, larder, bakehouse and the rest, with the stable and the mill, went to the King. But the church and the chapterhouse and their associated buildings, were 'deemed to be superfluous'.

### IV

It is often not difficult to trace the later careers of many of the disbanded monks, who were frequently given benefices, and we find some of them as vicars or curates well into Elizabeth's reign, having comfortably survived the vicissitudes of those revolutionary religious times. With ex-nuns it is not such an easy matter, but we can sometimes discover what happened to them by their wills, if they made any and had not married. In the case of Nunnaminster, wills were made by Elizabeth Shelley, Agnes Badgcroft, the sub-Prioress, and by two professed sisters, Edborow Stratford and Jane Wayte. After the suppression they all seem to have lived in the parish of St Peter Colbrook, possibly in the little properties which existed very close to the nunnery.

Dame Elizabeth, who made her will on 2 March 1546/7,<sup>60</sup> makes bequests to three other nuns whom she calls her 'sisters'. To Sister Agnes Badgcroft she gives the sum of 40s., her 'best cortlet, a pair of sheets, a rail and kerchief', and similar sums and items to the other nuns. She bequeaths to her niece, Margaret Shelley, 'my best frock and my hoop of gold' and to her other sisters, Margaret Selwood and Maude Aldrich, the sum of 20s. and a kerchief each. She does not forget the poor women of the 'systren house' to whom she leaves 12d. each, nor Sir Thomas Parys, the parson of St Maurice and her 'ghostly father', who received 10s., whilst the churches of St Maurice and St Peter Colbrook were left 20s. each for reparations.

Edborow Stratford made her will on 1 March 1551-2,<sup>61</sup> when she was 'sick of body', and in it she remembered Agnes Badgcroft and Margaret Shelley. In her own will Jane Wayte similarly makes bequests to those two sisters and, in addition, to Margaret Selwood and Mayde Aldridge.<sup>62</sup> She also mentions Jane Gainsford, another member of the late community, who is evidently dead, for she says that, of the £4 which 'my sister Jane Gainsford did give me, my brother Anthony shall have £3 and the other 20s. to be bestowed for her soul and all Christian souls.'

On 30 June 1556, in Queen Mary's reign, Agnes Badgcroft completed her last testament.<sup>63</sup> She makes simple bequests to Margaret Shelley, leaving her 'a kercher [kerchief], a matyle [mantle], a cupboard and 12d. in money'. Hers is the last of the nuns' wills, so far as is known,

58. Augmentations Office Misc. Bks. f. 96 and L & P 14 (2) 523. E315/494 ff. 11-15 gives date of surrender as 17 Nov. 1939.

59. Augmentations Book, 245, p. 96.

60. Classified wills, County Record Office, Winchester.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

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and since she does not mention any of the sisters concerned in other wills it is probable that they had all died. She bequeathed her 'professed ring' to 'the Blessed Sacrament for to be sold and to buy therewith a canopy for the Sacrament'.

One other interesting will remains to be noted, that of James Claghton or Clayton, the 'clerk and curate' of St Peter's, Colbrook, which was made on 9 September 1555, before, it will be seen, the date of Agnes Badgcroft's testament.<sup>64</sup> He leaves her 6s. 8d., but does not mention any other nun, although Margaret Shelley, no doubt much younger than the others, seems to be living on. James Claghton leaves Sir Walter Dashwood a jacket of russet and 'my chambleth doblett'.

We are able to surmise from the fact that the nuns dwelt in the same parish and mention in their wills a number of other nuns, that they all kept in close touch with each other after being disbanded; and there is little doubt that in a religiously-conservative city like Winchester the eight nuns concerned were able freely to lead some kind of community life. That they did so is, in the circumstances, a reasonable assumption, though there is no direct evidence of it. The goods they possessed were all quite simple in character and largely domestic; and it would seem that they all 'did for themselves', living quietly and modestly on their small pensions. It is also worth noting, as possibly some evidence of the modified community life which was probably being led, that Sir Walter Dashwood, one of the five priests at Nunnaminster at the time of the Dissolution, does not afterwards seem to have performed any parish duty, and it may be that he then acted as chaplain to the nuns.<sup>65</sup> He was, as we have seen, in touch with the curate of the parish (St Peter's), whilst Dame Elizabeth made him, 'Sir Walter Dashode, clerk, my chaplayne' one of her executors.

Elizabeth Shelley, when making her will in the first few months of the first year of Edward VI's reign, 1547, significantly called to mind 'that there is no earthly thing in this unstable and mutable world so certain as death'. She died later that year, though the exact date is not known.<sup>66</sup> From an inventory of 1 December 1556 among the muniments of Winchester College,<sup>67</sup> we learn that she gave to the College a 'little chalice of silver and parcel gilt', on condition that the 'nunnery of St Mary's in Winchester shall have it again in case it be restored and come up again in her time'. She also left to the College 'one fair carpet of tapestry' with the emblem of the Five Wounds of Our Lord in the centre.<sup>68</sup> Dame Elizabeth had had a close association with Winchester College, for she refers in her will to indentures which she had made with John White, Warden of the College, 'for discharging of my funeral's month's mind and year's mind', in other words her *obits*. John White, who became Mary's Bishop of Winchester, was one of the two supervisors of her will. That she was buried in the College is clear from the will of Thomas Bassett, a priest and Fellow of the College, which he made on 2 June 1554.<sup>69</sup> He says that he wishes 'my body to be buried in the said church by the grave of Mistress Shelley or else in any other holy ground within the precinct of the said college'.

Abbess Shelley, devout woman of religion and distinguished member of one of England's notable families, did not live to see the restoration of her Faith in Mary Tudor's reign.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Baigent Papers, Thomas Bassett, Winchester Cathedral Library.

66. Winchester College Muniments, 22204, *Compotus* for 18 Sept., 38 Henry VIII—2 Sep. I Ed. IV. Information kindly supplied by Mr John Harvey, Archivist, Winchester College.

67. W.C.M. 21875.

68. *Ibid.*, 21876.

69. Classified Wills, County Record Office, Winchester; Kirby, T. F., *Winchester Scholars*, p. 8.

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But courageous Shelleys were to be found among priests, nuns and recusants in later days, and it was not without reason that William Allen, the future Cardinal, described the Shelley family in 1575-6 as one of the great Catholic families of England.<sup>70</sup> Dame Elizabeth's own stalwart spirit would have rejoiced and her faith have been stimulated by the knowledge that in Elizabethan days the manor-house of her brother William at Mapledurham, some twelve miles from Winchester, would become a bastion of Catholic defence in Hampshire and, in particular, a famous harbourage for many of the seminary priests. Those were days, however, when the religious position in England had become crystallised, when Protestantism was dominant in the country, and when a rejuvenated Catholicism was struggling hard to strengthen its hold and regain lost ground. There is no doubt on which side the Abbess would then have been found. But she died long before this, when things religious were still in an uncertain state, and she had, in her last years, only her grim memories. Did she sometimes think, one wonders, of those events which must, when they occurred, have stirred or perplexed or saddened her pious soul: the execution of the unfortunate Nun of Kent, of Fisher, More and the Carthusians; the passing of the forlorn queen, Katherine of Aragon; the dissolution and despoiling of the monasteries, her own royal house eventually included; the hopeful courage and then the ruinous failure of the loyal Pilgrims of Grace; the brutal deaths of the last Abbots of Glastonbury, Reading and Colchester; and the merciless execution of Plantagenet Margaret Pole, whom, in Hampshire, she must have known? Of all these happenings Dame Elizabeth no doubt sometimes thought in the short time that was left to her after the death of the old King. Almost from week to week for so many years one event of turmoil had succeeded another, and the very air was too often heavy with gloom or darkened with a sense of impending tragedy. Nor did the early days of the new reign hold much promise of religious peace in the land or of lasting joy for its people. The world seemed 'unstable and mutable', indeed; and no earthly thing, the Abbess had said, was so certain as death.

70. Cath. Rec. Soc., 7, p. 65.