

ROMSEY MINSTER IN SAXON TIMES

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ABSTRACT

The prestige of Romsey in Norman times and its subsequent decline are thought to have obscured the status enjoyed by the earlier Saxon minster. Saint Balthild and other women venerated at Romsey are seen here to indicate 9th century support by royal women. Attention is invited to the ties between Wessex and the Continent, and to women's contribution to religious life before the 10th century Monastic Revival. Evidence is presented for temporary evacuation of the Romsey community to Winchester in AD 1001. The hypothesis of Nursling and Romsey Minster as a commonality is suggested as a basis for further reasoning.

INTRODUCTION

At Romsey is the only Norman nuns' church standing in England. The beautiful building and the marriage to the Conqueror's son of the princess educated at Romsey has focussed attention upon Norman times. This paper, however, reviews Romsey between about AD 700 when Bede received information from Bishop Daniel of Winchester on Hampshire's history, and about AD 1100 when Archbishop Anselm wrote to Athelitz, Abbess of Romsey, urging her not to create a new saint in the old Saxon way. The locally popular AD 907 foundation date will be evaluated, and the connection between Romsey Minster and Nursling Minster will be examined.

Nomenclature

A recent review of Saxon religious establishments before AD 899 commends the word *minster* to represent church, abbey, monastery, community, cenobium etc., until the differences become clear (Foot forthcoming). The practice will be adopted here. The same review of minsters showed that many received

secure land-grants soon after the Conversion. Men and/or women lived in some form of organisation, sharing a common table, and have had no personal wealth. There was prayer, study and work, which could include writing or embroidery. Much was done for lay neighbours, especially at festivals. Neither complete enclosure nor stability were essential characteristics of minsters; each had a mixture of functions, part mission station, and part place for prayer and study. All minsters had books; a few became centres of learning with a library, scriptorium and school.

Names of Saxon women have been spelt in many ways: Elflæda was often confused by later writers with Aethelflæda; Balthild in English was Batildis in Latin. Nuns would adopt the name of a popular saint or royal lady. The legend of one saint would cross that of another bearing the same name, resulting in contradictions and a muddle of dates and places (Dunbar 1904).

PRIMARY SOURCES

A major limitation in studying Anglo-Saxon Romsey is the shortage of charters from the pre-Conquest period itself. It is surprising that several hundred manuscripts survive from England at the eve of the Conquest, when there were 40 houses for monks and 6 for nuns, yet not one manuscript is catalogued as having been at Romsey in Saxon times.

New Minster's Book of Life

In AD 1031 a *Book of Life* was started at New Minster, Winchester. It named persons to be remembered in prayers, and recorded features of the minster's history. It reveals much about

Romsey, including the confraternity with New Minster. Whereas the drawings in the manuscript, now BL Stowe 944, have been widely reproduced and discussed, the text is less well known, although it was printed as the second offering of the Hampshire Record Society (Birch 1892).

Saints' Lists and Lives

Among a bundle of pre-Conquest manuscripts given by Archbishop Parker to Corpus Christi College were a *Regularis Concordia* and a *Bede* in a delicate and unusual hand, also homilies, laws, prayers and a list of saints. The prayers showed feminine forms. The collection is now CCC MS 201 (Ker 1957). According to the list: at Romsey rest Saint Maerwyn, the abbess who founded the minster, Saint Balthild, Queen, and Saint Aethelflaeda and many other saints (Rollason 1978).

John of Tynemouth's 14th century collection of saints' lives was published by Horstman in AD 1901 as *Nova Legenda Angliae*, using a copy made before BL Cotton Tiberius E1 was burnt to a crust. However, a key work for the early history of Romsey, the Romsey Book of Saints' Lives of about AD 1380 (BL Lansdowne 436), has not been edited, though the linked Edington Cartulary has recently been published (BL Lansdowne 442, Stevenson 1987).

Domesday Book

The Ordnance Survey facsimile of the Domesday Book published in AD 1862 showed, by extra space and independence from any hundred, the special status given to Romsey. Few scholars appreciated this.

Charters

Documentation relating to the foundation of the Wessex nunneries is surprisingly scarce, and foundation charters were apparently not issued. Shaftesbury is the only nunnery for which a foundation charter, if it can be so called, has survived (Meyer 1981). The new

understanding of forged charters shows that many were written retrospectively when a community felt its land-holdings insecure, as happened when monks were re-introduced at Winchester in AD 964 (Finberg 1964). The early allocation, security and continuity of Romsey's estates may thus explain the shortage of Romsey charters.

The 14th century cartulary of Edington Priory (BL Lansdowne 442) records King Edgar's grant of Edington to Romsey Abbey (Sawyer 765) and his confirmation of the privileges of Romsey Abbey (Sawyer 812). The latter charter has an addition in Old English recording the burial at Romsey of Edmund Atheling, King Edgar's heir. The will of Aelfifu (AD 966 × 975) records her bequest to Romsey Abbey of land at Whaddon in Buckinghamshire (Sawyer 1484).

Archaeological evidence

The Field Director of the Test Valley Archaeological Trust kindly described excavations at Romsey and nearby Nursling. The iron smelting site at Romsey is the largest of its type known in southern England, and was most likely active from the 7th to the late 9th century. It was very close to, but not on, the site of the minster. Here three phases of post-Roman timber buildings precede any stone building. Examination of animal bones has led to the dating of the middle phase of occupation of the timber buildings to the period AD 650–700. Burials, not necessarily Christian, predate any stone building on the site. An unusual burial, probably within a timber building, was of an important person.

At Romsey, rammed chalk footings, which may have supported flint or timber walls, suggest a range of buildings including a minster, by the 10th century. Large stones from a Roman buildings were used in the foundations of the stone Saxon minster which underlies its Norman successor. Carved stones that were used in the Saxon minster came from quarries near Bath.

Although construction of a canal and a railway through both Romsey and Nursling

disturbed some ground, considerable areas remained for investigation. Excavations at Nursling have been most unproductive in terms of archaeological finds of the Saxon period, particularly near the present church at Nursling, where no such evidence has been found. Excavations at Romsey have produced many finds of the Saxon period (Green and Scott forthcoming).

Asser's Life of King Alfred

Details of the Wessex royal family, and a view of circumstances in the second half of the 9th century can be drawn from Asser, who appears to have used an underlying, but now lost, version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Limitation

MS CCCC 173, known as the A-text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was copied in the first years of the 11th century to form the G-text, later held at Southwick Priory, which was not founded until the 12th century; neither of these versions of the Chronicle will be used here to shape the history of Romsey, because it is not known where they were produced.

SECONDARY SOURCES AND DIVERSIONS

Previous attempts to write the history of Romsey were hampered by difficulties of access to material, and by certain widespread misunderstandings. By the time of William of Malmesbury, Romsey's history was already hedged about with uncertainties. Secondary sources present traditions which can be valuable, but they can also perpetuate errors.

Study of Romsey Minster was hindered when the Keeper of Records in the Tower of London in 1771 wrongly identified a Saxon manuscript as referring to Frome rather than Romsey (Birch 1892, 199). There was a flicker of activity in AD 1841 when the Hon and Rev GT Noel MA became Vicar of Romsey, and Charles Spence dedicated an essay to him.

The essay quoted Leland's opinion that Romsey Minster was founded by Edward the Elder, and continued '*Richard de Hovedon* (sic) (fol.244.6.) also says, "Anno DCCCCVII. Rex Ang Edgarus in monasterio Rumesiae quod avus suus construxerat, sanctimoniales collocavit, sanctamque Merwennam super eas abbatissam constituit.'" Published by John Gray in the same year as the essay, a booklet quoted Roger de Hovedene more closely, associating the construction with King Edward the Elder, and omitting the AD 907 date (Stubbs 1868). AD 907 probably became the earliest written date for Romsey because of Hovedene's layout of his chronicle page, rather than through his access to a source now lost.

The Victoria County History of Hampshire (Vol 1 1900, Vol 2 1903) said '*The statements with regard to the early foundation of Romsey are confusing and conflicting, but it would seem probable that King Edward the Elder founded this house about the year AD 907 and that Saint Elfleda became abbess and was buried there.*'

Liveing's *Records of Romsey Abbey*, first published in 1906, contained nothing new about the foundation, but was the basis for much of the pageant held at Romsey in 1907, popularising the unsubstantiated foundation date of AD 907.

Recent pointers

Women's contribution to the 10th century Monastic Revival has been undervalued by historians (Stenton 1971, 445). A major art-form especially associated with Anglo-Saxon women is embroidery. Surviving examples, such as the embroideries made for Bishop Frithestan of Winchester, show strong links with the iconography of contemporary manuscripts (Battiscombe 1956, Temple 1976). Saxon women may quite possibly have worked in an important but unlocated Wessex scriptorium (Bately 1986 xxxii). It may be that some unprovenanced works were originally produced at Romsey.

Nuns' minsters were founded by kings and royal women. Nuns prayed for the king, guarded the dead, housed the relics, educated

the children, cared for the sick and provided a fashionable place for the king's wife to give birth (Stafford 1983). Royal dowagers who lost their place at court found a home in nunneries. Abbesses were of royal blood, and the queens and princesses who were venerated as saints enhanced the dignity of the royal house, and gave spiritual support to its temporal authority (Meyer 1981). The peculiar royal status of the Anglo-Saxon nunneries has recently been revealed (Yorke 1989a).

King Aethelwulf's Decimations referred to the Ever-Virgin Mary and the glorious Queen and Mother of God. An illuminated bible made for Queen Judith's father featured Saint Mary as Queen of Heaven. Saint Anne was said to have taught her daughter, the Virgin, to read. Thus the images of royal and holy women who were literate were displayed as examples.

Women linked Wessex with Mercia and its learning: King Aethelwulf's daughter married King Burhred of Mercia in AD 853 and was styled as Queen; a Mercian noblewoman married Alfred, King Aethelwulf's youngest son, in AD 868.

Royal patronage supported nuns in Wessex in the middle of the 9th century. The continued existence of nuns' minsters in King Alfred's reign was vouched for by his laws, where if there was not much about monks, there was a good deal about nuns (Whitelock 1968). Although there is no conclusive evidence, a number of pointers suggest that Romsey may have been the site of one of these nunneries in the 9th century.

William of Malmesbury wrote a little about the three minsters at Chertsey, Romsey and Wherwell in the pre-Conquest see of Winchester, but he admitted his ignorance of Romsey's saints.

The contribution of women to learning and religion is now being revalued.

LOCATION

Terrain

The Roman road from Winchester to the southwest forded the tidal mouth of the river

Test from Reed-Ford, Redbridge or Nursling on the eastern bank, to Eling on the western side where the route bifurcated, turning south to Lepe (*ad lapidem*) and the shortest water-crossing to the Isle of Wight, or continuing to Ringwood and Wimborne. Three miles upstream from Nursling on the same eastern bank is Romsey, an hour from Winchester on a good horse, and a natural stepping-off point for a day's westward march on foot or with ox-cart to cross *The Wood of the Jutes*, later called *The New Forest*. This barrier of poor soils between the populated areas of Hampshire and Dorset influenced the boundary of the new see of Sherborne when it was detached from Winchester.

The route from Bath to Southampton was via Bradford-on-Avon, Edington, Wilton and Romsey. A route from the upper Thames valley used the Test valley to reach Southampton. Boats sailed down Southampton Water and across 100 miles of sea to the river Seine, Rouen and Paris.

A southward move by Saxons to take over the Jutes' commercially attractive territory on the south coast, and found the Wessex kingdom, has been convincingly suggested (Yorke 1989b). Saxons advancing down the Test valley would want to hold Romsey and nearby high ground, in order to control the opening from the chalklands into the coastal strip, and to dominate the front of the New Forest extending from the Test at Netley Marsh to the Avon at Charford.

Minsters

The Wessex kings in the late 7th and early 8th century endowed a network of minsters on royal estates across their kingdom. It has been suggested that the original group around Southampton Water was: Eling, Romsey, Southampton, Waltham and Titchfield (Hase 1988). The pattern of these minster areas around Southampton Water can be seen again in maps of *Domesday hundreds*, where the name of Eling Minster's area has become Redbridge. At the moment it is hard to say whether or not Romsey was a head-minster or

mother-church, but its position at a focus of later parishes supports arguments that one of the early minsters was at Romsey. The Test valley between Romsey and tidal water covers less than 30 square kilometers, in which there is little arable and few settlements. It is mud-flats prone to floods, with gravel mounds providing fords and landing-beaches. In this limited area historians and archaeologists have sought four possible minsters: Eling, Redbridge, Nursling and Romsey. The two naturally inviting sites are at Eling (SU 3612), which was an early centre for receiving the king's food-rent, and at Romsey (SU 3521) where excavations also suggest likelihood of an early minster.

Nutshell Nursling contrasts significantly with *Roomy Romsey*. Both words, *Nutshell* and *Nursling* are diminutives, suggesting a contrast with something larger. It was normal for minsters to start in a small way, accommodating a few persons at a site where only minor works were required. It was not unusual for a community to hope to thrive and move to a better location when numbers and wealth permitted, unless the original site had special holy associations. Floods caused several early minsters to move. The Nursling ford may have been abandoned when the Roman works deteriorated, or because of the raids in AD 842 reported by Nithard, a Frankish writer. The minster may have moved from Nursling because of these events, or when it outgrew the Nursling site. It is unlikely that there were two minsters so close together. The assets and functions of Nursling Minster may have been dispersed to Eling, Romsey and Winchester. The site at Romsey was suitable for a river-crossing and a large minster, to be protected by King Alfred's burhs at Southampton and Winchester against attack from south and east. The threat to Romsey was from a Danish force that could keep its mobility in the area we call the New Forest, and so attack from the west.

Saint Boniface

Winfrith, later known as Saint Boniface, was master of the renowned school in the Test

valley, usually identified with Nursling. Nuns attended his lectures, and made books for him (Talbot 1954, xii). He declined the invitation to be abbot there and set off early in the 8th century to take Christianity to the Germans. His most important woman helper, Leofgyth, came from Wimborne, west of the wood. He was joined by Willibald from Waltham Minster. An English nun wrote the story of the journey from Waltham to Germany via Rouen, Rome and the Holy Land. However, in spite of archaeological investigation, no material dating from the time of Saint Boniface has been found at Nursling.

FOUNDATION OF ROMSEY NUNNERY

Circumstances in the 9th century influenced the foundation of nunneries. It is necessary to consider events in Wessex and on the Continent, and to recall that saints formed part of the structure of the Saxon state, indicating royal power and balancing episcopal authority. Wessex kings designated the cult-centres and deplored the dispersal of relics. English saints' lists were like a Domesday Book of saintly holdings, ensuring that each minster should know its saints and not usurp another's. Romsey had more authorised saints than any other nuns' minster.

King Aethelwulf

In AD 839 King Aethelwulf began his reign over Wessex. He issued his First Decimation in AD 844 at Winchester, revealing his intention to relieve by one-tenth the burden of taxation on both monks and nuns. On Easter Day 854, at Wilton, King Aethelwulf, now very powerful and confident, issued his Second Decimation, enabling one-tenth of his land to be passed to the Church. King Aethelwulf was a devout man with a very religious wife of Jutish stock named Osburh, who encouraged their sons' learning by offering her book of Saxon poems to whichever could learn them first (Asser 23). Osburh died about AD 854: a remarkable woman, mother of five Wessex kings and one Queen of Mercia. In

AD 855 King Aethelwulf went to Rome and gave work of goldsmiths and needlewomen to the Church.

Frankish influence

King Aethelwulf arrived back in Wessex with a new Queen. In a great ceremony, that included the first certain anointing of a medieval queen, he married Judith, the daughter of Charles the Bald, the King of the Franks. Nunneries were important in Charles' lands, he took them under his protection, and was himself placed under their saints' protection. The mother of the new Queen of Wessex was Lay Protector Abbess of Chelles, near Paris, where the remains of Saint Balthild had been translated in AD 833. Balthild had been Queen, Empress and Regent of the Franks, before becoming patron saint of Chelles. She was renowned for her church politics. Bede reported unfavourably about her because his informant disliked an archbishop she appointed (Nelson 1986).

King Aethelwulf and Queen Judith had two eventful years in England. In AD 858 King Aethelwulf died. The Frankish influence continued because the young and anointed Queen Judith married Aethelbald, the next King of Wessex, and the son of King Aethelwulf. After her second husband died in AD 860 she returned to her parents. Her son by her third husband married King Alfred's youngest daughter (Campbell, 1962).

Saint Balthild

The pre-Conquest list of saints' resting places (CCCC 201) states that Saint Balthild, Queen, rests at Romsey. Continental sources, however, make it clear that she rests at Chelles. It is probable that a relic of the Frankish royal saint was moved to Romsey, and her cult established there, when Judith was Queen of Wessex from AD 856 to 860. The English preference for undivided remains led to a localised and unsubstantiated belief that Queen Balthild, not just a relic, lay at Romsey. Her cult there would be strengthened by her supposed origins as a slave from Wessex.

Saint Maerwyn

The saints' list recording Saint Balthild at Romsey, also states that Saint Maerwyn, the abbess who founded the minster, rests at Romsey. The New Minster *Book of Life*, written in AD 1031, contains a copy of an early list of English saints' resting-places. The concluding entry states that Saint Maerwyn rests at Romsey beside the river Test. The style of the entry, with a resting-place beside a named river, is appropriate for a saint translated in the 9th century or earlier (Rollason 1978).

Romsey nunnery

Traditions recorded in saints' *Lives* suggest that King Aethelwulf was helped by holy women to found minsters for nuns. Frankish influence accompanying Queen Judith would be encouraging. There was adequate wealth in Wessex, and suitable sites in the Test valley, where minsters were in a state of transition and therefore ripe for development. Archaeological evidence suggests occupation and building at Romsey. We may never be certain about the date of the first nuns' community at Romsey, but circumstances, archaeology and the early saints associated with Romsey, suggest the 9th century. No saints lie at Nursling; the famous master of the Test valley school rests beside the river Fulda.

ROMSEY AND KING EDWARD THE ELDER

The *Liber de Hyda* records the children of King Edward the Elder. Heading the list of daughters is Aethelflaeda, with the statement that she was at Romsey. At that time, a king's eldest daughter, if a nun, would be an abbess, and later a saint. Here is the woman at the root of the stories of Romsey's Saint Aethelflaeda. She is probably the Saint Aethelflaeda named, along with Saint Maerwyn and Saint Balthild, in pre-Conquest CCCC 201.

Her sisters' husbands, who included Otto the Great, and Charles the Simple, ruled

Europe at the time she ruled Romsey, opening that community to influences from across the Channel.

King Edward the Elder set up the nuns' minster at Winchester, and there are traditions that he strengthened Romsey.

ROMSEY AND KING EDGAR

Charters of King Edgar to Romsey are known because of copies made in the cartulary of Edington Priory in the 14th century. The charters grant or confirm Edington to Romsey, and confirm Romsey's privileges. The latter is especially interesting because it is followed by a note in Old English of the burial of Edmund Atheling at Romsey. He had been King Edgar's heir, the child listed at a witness to a New Minster charter (BL Cotton Vespasian A viii) and remembered in their *Book of Life*.

Factions supported rival heirs to King Edgar: Edmund Atheling; and the older son who became King Edward the Martyr. The burial of one at Romsey, and the other at Shaftesbury, may have polarised the two abbeys for a time. The accession of King Aethelred II, full brother of the Edmund buried at Romsey, may have brought support to Romsey Abbey.

The charter with the note about Edmund Atheling has been printed, (Sawyer No. 812 & Birch CS No. 1187) and a recent translation of the note is available (Stevenson 1987). It has been deduced from the burnt G-text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and from copies of it made before the Cottonian fire, that Annal 971 in the A-text of the Chronicle recorded the death of Edmund Atheling and his burial at Romsey. The annal in the A-text has been erased and the space left blank, which is surprising, because other erasures were followed by the insertion of alternative records.

King Edgar placed a child named Aethelflaeda in Romsey. In time she became Abbess of Romsey, and then a saint. She will be referred to here as the ward of King Edgar, to avoid confusing her with the earlier Saint Aethelflaeda, daughter of King Edward the

Elder. There are two versions of the *Life* of Saint Aethelflaeda, ward of King Edgar (BL Lansdowne 436, BL Cotton Tiberius Ei, Horstman 1901). Some Victorian editors mixed the stories of one Saint Aethelflaeda with the dates of the other.

Saint Aethelflaeda, ward of King Edgar, was probably illegitimate and of royal blood, which accounts for the confusing stories of her birth. As a nun she is said to have stayed at times with the Queen at court.

It was an Abbess of Romsey, named Merwenna, who took into her care the young ward of King Edgar. The name of this abbess has caused confusion with the Maerwyn who founded Romsey, but there is evidence that they are not one and the same person. The New Minster *Book of Life*, written in AD 1031, contains a list of illustrious women to be prayed for: Abbesses Merwynn and Aethelflaeda are in the list, without any indication that they had yet been sanctified. In a separate section of the New Minster book is the list of saints' resting-places, concluded by the reference to Saint Maerwynn at Romsey. Examination of a facsimile, rather than a printed version of the *Book of Life*, strongly suggests that the writers about AD 1031 knew they were recorded two different women. It is not unlikely that a 10th century abbess would take the name of the founding abbess, and shine in the light of her earlier namesake.

King Edgar confirmed Romsey's privileges, and deemed it a worthy burial place for his heir, and a suitable nunnery for his ward.

ROMSEY IN THE 11th CENTURY

At the beginning of the century King Aethelred II was reigning and the Danes were threatening. The nuns had been secure at Romsey, protected by Winchester and Southampton, when the Danes raided London and southeast England in AD 994.

A *Life* of Saint Aethelflaeda, ward of King Edgar, contains the following item: '*The Abbess Merwenna died, and Elwina was proposed in her place. She, kneeling before the altar, heard a voice from*

Heaven concerning the arrival of the Danes at the minster of Romsey the following evening. So, gathering up the relics and other items, she fled to Winchester with the sisters.' (BL Cotton Tiberius Ei) This withdrawal to Winchester probably took place in AD 1001 when the Shaftesbury nuns withdrew to Bradford-on-Avon; communities were evacuated to their burhs to avoid the Danes who landed in Devon and forced their way east to control the Isle of Wight and coastal areas (Stenton 1971, 378).

The item continues: '*Thus, Swein, King of the Danes, came to those parts with his son Cnut, and laid waste to all parts by slaughter and fire. The Abbess Ehwina died three years later and the holy virgin Aethelflaeda was elected.*' Saint Aethelflaeda, ward of King Edgar, led the resurgence at Romsey after the evacuation.

King Cnut

The New Minster *Book of Life* was started in the reign of King Cnut, and records his support for the Church, indicating that Romsey Abbey probably thrived at that time.

The English princess from Hungary

Christina retired into the nunnery at Romsey and took the veil in AD 1086. Her sister was Queen of Scotland, later known as Saint Margaret; her brother was Edgar the Atheling; her mother, Agatha of Friesland, had married Edward in Kiev, and raised their children in Hungary. The family has arrived in England in AD 1057, and was greatly favoured by Edward the Confessor, and later by William the Conqueror. Agatha gave money to Romsey, according to Hyde. Abbey records. Christina did not give her lands to Romsey, but returned them to King William. The lands were in Oxfordshire and Warwickshire (Ronay 1989). The generosity shown by kings to Christina's family suggest she would have taken wealth, prestige and influence to Romsey.

The Saxon princess and the Conqueror's son

The daughters of Queen Margaret at Scotland

received part of their education at Romsey, in the care of their aunt, Christina. One daughter, Edith, later known as Matilda, was married to King Henry I in AD 1100. The connections between Romsey and the royal family continued throughout the 11th century.

ROMSEY MINSTER'S ASSETS

Iron smelting brought wealth to Romsey, beginning in the 6th century. Subsequently, generous endowments and excellent communications supported Romsey Minster. To these were added material treasures, and abstract but valuable assets such as legends and reputation. In the 850s' the young Queen Judith from overseas would be like grit in an oyster, stimulating Wessex to out-shine Frankia. The cult of her saint, Balthild, was not at Winchester as might be expected, but at Romsey. Such a minster in the 9th century would undoubtedly attract highborn women. The continuing royal patronage and saints' cults accumulated wealth for Romsey Minster.

Romsey's estates

Romsey itself was a generous endowment for a minster, the eastern boundary contiguous for two miles with the monks' enormous estate surrounding Winchester; west of the river Test good land at Wellow blended into the poor soils of the New Forest; to the south the estate reached tidal water.

In Winchester, the Abbess of Romsey held one of the seven major fiefs, in the important southwest quarter and close to the palace and the minster. Her holdings intermingled with those of the king, bishop and prior, suggesting allocation when King Alfred revitalised Winchester in AD 885 (Biddle 1976).

Northeast of Winchester, Stoke on the River Itchen belonged to Romsey at Domesday, when New Minster held adjoining Candover. Dowry land of King Alfred's sister was said to be nearby (Plummer 1899 ii 80; Birch CS No 865).

In northern Hampshire the Romsey estate at

Sydmonton and Clere was described in a charter of King Edmund to a religious woman (Stagg 1985). It was the twin of the adjoining estate of the Winchester monks, said in a charter of King Edgar to have been given to them when King Aethelwulf tithed his domains (Birch CS No. 1151; Finbert 1964).

Romsey owned in Wiltshire 40-hide Ashton and 30-hide Edington. The Edington estate included the site of the battle, and rich land in the vale, as well as Imber in the Plain; the western edge adjoined Bradford-on-Avon and Somerset, and was five miles from Bath.

King Alfred's will

There is a link from Romsey's estates back to King Alfred's private property, that which he could give on the spindle (female) side as well as on the spear (male) side. King Alfred bequeathed to his wife and his three daughters his estates at Wellow, Clere, Candover, Welig, Ashton, Chippenham, Lambourne, Wantage and Edington. The coincidence between the bequests and Romsey's estates is noteworthy: at Wellow and at Clere the match is good; it is blurred around Stoke and Candover; the Ashton bequest might be either Steeple-Ashton or Ashton-Keynes (Keynes and Lapidge 1983); the match at Edington is excellent. The land where King Alfred won his greatest victory, he left to his wife; it passed to the Abbess of Romsey. King Alfred's eldest daughter, Aethelflaeda, nominated to receive Wellow, married and left Wessex to be *The Lady of the Mercians*. His youngest daughter probably parted with Chippenham, Ashton and Welig when she went overseas to marry Queen Judith's son. Domesday lists no Romsey land at Welig, near Freshwater on the Isle of White, but in AD 1288 the Abbess of Romsey received money for her rights over the church there (Liveing 1906). The middle daughter was said to be destined for Shaftesbury (Asser 98). She may have died before receiving the estates at Clere and Candover, strangely the easternmost of all those given to the ladies, the furthest from Shaftesbury, and never listed in the land-holdings of that min-

ster, yet both were associated with Romsey and Winchester.

King Alfred appears to have published his will by AD 888, eleven years before his death. In AD 1031 the New Minster monks wrote their *Book of Life* in which they revealed their confraternity with Romsey, and included their version of King Alfred's will, which is the source of all existing copies.

King Alfred, during his reign, gave a substantial part of his income to the Church, possibly by transferring the income of particular estates to minsters. His wife and daughters may have continued the practice, or strengthened it, by giving estates to the minster.

Domesday

In AD 1086 the Conqueror's commissioners asked for the names of places, and of their owners at that time and twenty years earlier, in the time of King Edward. A highly significant proportion of what the Abbess of Romsey said she owned in AD 1066 had been listed in the *Book of Life* only 35 years before that, as bequests in King Alfred's will. Consider the transmission of the Edington estate on its own: in AD 1031 the New Minster scribe wrote that King Alfred left it to his wife; in AD 1086 the Abbess of Romsey convinced the Conqueror's commissioners that she had always owned Edington. With decreasing documentary evidence it appears that Wellow, Clere, Ashton, Welig and Stoke passed similarly from King Alfred, via his wife and daughters, to the Abbess of Romsey. The nuns of Romsey believed in AD 1031, 1066 and 1086 that almost all their land had come to them from King Alfred's ladies.

Treasures

Stone sculptures from Saxon times, and still at Romsey, are of astonishing quality. The large rood shows the Hand of God, a symbol adopted by the Wessex royal family. The small rood in the Chapel of Saint Anne deserves more attention; Saint Mary and Saint John

feature clearly, and two soldiers with lance and reed are twisted in the branches growing from the Cross, recalling certain manuscripts and suggesting Ottonian influence.

The Abbess of Romsey owned parts of Winchester, close to the palace, and in the streets where the goldsmiths worked. She probably held the property from AD 885, keeping her community close to artistic developments and skilled workers through times of great creativity in King Alfred's reign.

Reputation

King Alfred's granddaughter became Abbess of Romsey. She was well placed to maintain links with her sisters married into the Ottonian and Frankish royal families, and to control estates that had come to Romsey from her grandmother and her aunts.

A pair of suspect charters of King Edgar and Archbishop Dunstan reveals Romsey's standing: they benefited Crowland Abbey, near Peterborough (Birch CS Nos 1178 & 1179). Impressive witnesses were listed, with Abbess Merwenna of Romsey taking precedence between the Abbot of Westminster, and Ordgar, the Queen's father. Crowland's forgers thought Abbess Merwenna of Romsey an awesome name to use. These charters are connected to others supposed to have been witnessed by King Burhred. They reveal a tradition linking Romsey with Mercia.

An Edington scribe believed about AD 1380 that Romsey Abbey was rich before the 10th century Monastic Revival. He copied a charter of King Edgar that renewed Romsey's freedom from earthly service, and hinted at a Decimation (Birch CS No. 1187; Stevenson 1987). Abbess Merwenna gave King Edgar 900 mancuse, which looks like the first fruits of her Lordship of a Hundred: 100 ploughs at 10 mancuse per plough, less ten per-cent, equals 900 mancuse. (1 ox cost 1 mancuse, Whitelock 1954, 96).

King Henry I found the Saxon buildings at Romsey capacious enough to accommodate his court when he was en route to embark at Eling for France.

The Abbess of Romsey was Lord of the Hundred containing her Wiltshire estates. Knights from Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset were summoned to Romsey Abbey as jurors for the New Forest courts (Stagg 1979).

Romsey Abbey suffered no setback at the time of the Conquest. The Norman kings, impressed by the Saxon state, ran it at its full power. The smooth continuation of Romsey Abbey as a major institution shows it as having, in Saxon times, a reputation that the incoming Normans wished to retain.

DECLINE

Women were removed from the mainstream of organised religious life by the later 10th century monastic reformers and Wessex kings (Meyer 1981). The buildings of Romsey Abbey reveal wealth until about AD 1300 and straitened circumstances thereafter. The courts for the New Forest were moved away to Lyndhurst. The last abbess of a Romsey community with 100 nuns died during the Black Death. In AD 1351 the Bishop of Winchester, William of Edington, established his chantry at Edington in Wiltshire; it was a very late religious foundation, and soon became a wealthy one. As the Prior of Edington and the universities gained, so the Abbess of Romsey lost. Significantly the English army sacked Chelles in AD 1358. In Winchester, six of the seven major fiefs continued to the Dissolution; the exception being that of the Abbess of Romsey which had declined by the 13th century, her important property in Gold Street, or Southgate Street, having passed to Southwick Priory (Biddle 1976 159, entry 864 n1). Two centuries of decay occurred at Romsey, leaving a poor picture of the place.

CONCLUSIONS

There will always be a question mark over Romsey's foundation date and the identity of its saints, but there can be no doubt about the importance of Romsey's connections with the

royal house. Romsey Minster fitted the pattern of 8th century minster areas. Before AD 750, the centre of learning in the Test valley was ruled by abbots. The evidence for a minster at Romsey in the 9th century is archaeological and circumstantial: the dates of important burials awaiting confirmation, the female Saints Balthild and Maerwyn, the influence of Queen Judith, the laws of King Alfred protecting nuns, his allocation of Winchester land, the lack of other land-owners at Romsey. The development from early minster to royal nunnery most likely occurred during the 9th century.

Throughout the 10th century abbesses ruled Romsey: the hub of saints' cults, of rich estates in Hampshire and Wiltshire, and of royal connections with the Franks and Ottonians.

In AD 1001 the Romsey community was temporarily evacuated to Winchester, but soon returned to build a great new abbey. Romsey's royal links were probably strong by the reign of King Aethelwulf, and continued even under the Normans. After AD 1300 Romsey declined severely. The church stood as a reminder of Norman importance, but earlier times at Romsey received little attention until the recent national revival of Anglo-Saxon studies.

There is increasing evidence for an early minster at Romsey, whilst Nursling Minster remains notional. The hypothesis of two separate minsters: Romsey, well-documented and materially supported, Nursling, unsubstantiated as yet, seems no longer tenable. A new supposition, that there was one evolving minster, may now be a better basis for research.

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List of abbreviations used

BL British Library
 CCCC Corpus Christi College Cambridge
 Birch CS *Cartularium Saxonicum*
 Sawyer Anglo-Saxon Charters

Documents in manuscript

BL Lansdowne 436 *Chronicle of Kings and Book of Saints*.
 BL Lansdowne 442 *Edington Cartulary*.

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