KING HENRY the EIGHTH and DOVER PRIORY

Ivan Green

HENRY THE EIGHTH has been blamed for the destruction of the mediaeval religious houses but what he really did was to hasten and put to an end the course of their decline, which had started a century earlier.

This period is well documented, particularly in the British Museum, Lambeth Palace Library, the Bodelian Library at Oxford, the Canterbury Cathedral Library and the county records at Maidstone. By the beginning of the sixteenth century the great age of faith had ebbed away and even the great religious houses were increasingly run down and the numbers of their occupants dwindling fast. Even the great Priory at Canterbury was only about a third full and at the famous St. Augustine's Abbey there were only ten monks living in its vast range of buildings.

The friaries and smaller houses all over the country were even harder hit. They had long since ceased to be the holy, charitable and caring institutions they once were and a number had already been closed by powerful men for various purposes. Cardinal Wolsey, to name but one, obtained papal permission to close a number of religious houses, of which Tonbridge was one, and to transfer their money, rights and holdings to a new college he was planning to found at Oxford. Another local one, Davington near Faversham, was deserted by its last remaining nun in 1535. It was a country-wide situation.

St. Martin of the New Work, better known as Dover Priory, was reduced to a dozen religious occupants, living the leisurely life of gentlemen and served by a number of servants and retainers. Their behaviour fell far short of their professed standards and even their most important service, their famous Passage Mass, often remained unsung.

The entrance gatehouse from the Folkestone Road

Dover Priory, however, had very old roots. In Saxon times the secular canons of St. Martin had their great church and administrative centre at the west side of the Market Square, where the museum, the White Cliffs Experience and the Roman Painted House now stand. The canons held much land and

The Refectory

rights locally and this is well recorded in the Domesday Book under the Dover entries at the beginning of the Kent section and is headed 'Land of the canons of St. Martin's of Dover'. There is no room here to detail all their considerable holdings but their property and rights locally included those at Charlton, Buckland, Guston, St. Margaret's, Deal, Sibertswold (Shepherdswell), Farthingloe, Hougham and those in Canterbury and other parts of Kent.

The canons were secular, many of them married with children, some of whom succeeded to their father's positions. Many of the canons actually lived with their families on their lands in the villages among the local population. The papal requirement of priestly continence did not then apply. They were very similar in many ways to present day Church of England priests living among their people in their own separate parishes.

The canons lost some of their lands and mills to the plundering Norman invaders, but in general little seems to have disturbed their settled way of life until the 12th century, an era when religious bodies proliferated. Then began an enormous campaign of acquiring lands and rights of all kinds, including the great tythes of hundreds of parishes and even the outright possession of whole areas of the country. So much so that by the end of the 15th century church dignitaries and religious institutions held as much as a half of all the wealth of England, yet by that time controlled an ever decreasing number of the religious.

In 1123 the new archbishop, Corbeil, in the very first year of his office, looked with envy at the canons of St. Martin's because they were directly under the protection of the king. Neither the archbishop nor the church had any authority over them. It was the same privileged situation as that which applied to the towns of the Cinque Ports. Corbeil resented the canons' independence from the church hierarchy and coveted their property and rights. By blackmailing King Henry the First with

threats of eternal damnation, he persuaded the king to pass authority over the old secular canons to him.

Corbeil lost no time in seizing the canons' lands and rights, casting them adrift and assuming complete authority over their lands, their villagers and the whole panoply of mediaeval memorial control descended upon them.

The gatehouse from the inside of the grounds when the site was a farm. At the bottom right is a part of one of the two ponds, thought to have been the monks' fishponds. This is doubtful, since they bought large quantities of fish from the town's fish market

As Richard Muir pointed out, the manorial system "was a disheartening array of devices for removing the profits of peasant drudgery into the coffers of the local lord and the church" - and here the church was both.

The desperately poor peasant, huddling in his one-roomed, mud hovel, was tied to his native soil and had to pay a fine on taking over a little plot of land from his dead father and a "heriot" tax when he died. Before his daughter was married permission had to be obtained and a "merchat" tax paid, together with frequent fines and demands for labour on the lord's land. Meanwhile the church took a yearly tythe, a tenth of what little he produced, probably his fat beast or part of his seed corn. It was by these means that the mediaeval church authority could put in hand and arrange for the completion of the great stone buildings of the new Priory - some parts of which still survive - built upon the sweat and blood of the desperately poor and oppressed villagers who until then had been neighbours of the displaced Saxon canons in their villages.

The affairs of the Priory are very well documented in the British Museum and other sources already mentioned, but those who prefer their information predigested can find much of what they need in a book called "Dover Priory" by Charles Reginald Haines, published in 1930. The Priory had an undistinguished existence. For its first two centuries it was in continual dispute with the monks of the great priory in Canterbury and for its last two centuries it was in subjection to them. Considerable sums of money were spent on litigation and in continual appeals to higher authority and to the pope. Its spiritual authority dwindled and the behaviour of its monks, as shown in injunctions issued in official visitations, especially that of Archbishop Warham in 1511, left much to be desired. But they lived well. Since Haines will be available to everyone, I will quote some of the information he uses with regard to their accounts for the year 1530-31.

It is obvious that the Priory's larders were constantly stocked with all kinds of

meat, fish and continental wines. The monks were paid yearly wages and their staff, of no less than seventeen servants of the Hospitium, included the "joculator organorum" (the organist), Robert called Round Robin and a washer woman of cloths and house linen.

The cost of the Priory's own farm employees was £22-11-8d, very substantial money in those days. A considerable sum was also expended for legal expenses.

As previously mentioned, the religious were all paid a salary and they included the prior, sub prior, three novices and, it appears (although the document is not quite clear on this point) either three or four monks. So a tiny number of religious were served by a substantial number of servants, craftsmen and labourers and were the possessors of many hundreds of acres of land, mills and rights.

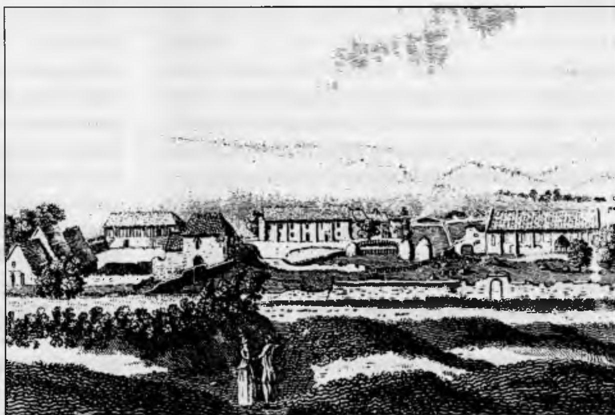
It is clear that the old monkish tradition of poverty, obedience, physical labour and the very frequent observance of worship had long since been abandoned.

The end of the religious houses came quite quickly and mostly without protest from the general population. King Henry acted against them in stages. First, in 1534, all the religious were ordered to sign the royal document called 'The Act of Supremacy' by which they recognised King Henry, and no longer the Pope, as the head of the church in England.

The Dover Priory document was signed by the prior and twelve religious, three of whom were novices.

In 1536 the smaller institutions, that is those with a membership of not more that thirteen and a yearly income of less than about £200 a year were suppressed. This included Dover Priory whose members consisted only of the prior and eight religious who signed the Deed of Surrender of the Priory.

Henry was at least more considerate to the monks than Archbishop Corbeil had been to the canons of St. Martin's he cast adrift. The religious, countrywide, were given three choices. They could be transferred to one of the larger surviving monasteries. they could move to a post of parish priest, or they could opt for a pension. Thousands of religious, all over the country, opted for a pension, the usual sum having been £4 or £5 a year, the stipend for a parish priest, a very reasonable sum in those days. There were moves to transfer two of the Priory's novices to Christ Church, Canterbury, though whether they actually went there is not recorded as far as I could see. The Prior, however, as priors seem to have done countrywide, had a much more generous settlement, which he seems to have enjoyed as a country gentleman for several years.



A drawing dated 28 May 1787 by S. Cooper, a very early artist who produced many fine Kent illustrations in the late 18th century

It must be mentioned that this brief, condensed article is really only an introduction to a complex subject which would need several substantial books to do it justice, but it will probably be sufficient groundwork for the general, non-specialist reader.