

The Tale of a Fish

How Westminster Abbey became a Royal Peculiar

For Edric it had been a bad week's fishing in the Thames for salmon and an even worse Sunday, a day on which he knew ought not to have been working but needs must. The wind and the rain howled across the river from the far banks of that dreadful and wild isle called Thorney with some justification. The little monastic church recently built on the orders of King Sebert stood forlornly waiting to be consecrated the next day by Bishop Mellitus, the first Bishop of London, who would be travelling west from the great Minster of St Paul's in the City of London.

As he drew in his empty nets and rowed to the southern bank he saw an old man dressed in strange and foreign clothing hailing him. Would Edric take him across even at this late hour to Thorney Island? Hopeful for some reward, Edric rowed across the river, moaning to the old man about the poor fishing he had suffered and received some sympathy as the old man seemed to have had some experience in the same trade.

After the old man had alighted and entered the little church, suddenly the building was ablaze with dazzling lights and Edric heard chanting and singing and saw a ladder of angels leading from the sky to the ground. Edric was transfixed. Then there was silence and darkness. The old man returned and admonished Edric for fishing on a Sunday but said that if he cast his nets again the next day into the river his reward would be great.

So Edric rowed the man back to the far shore where as he stepped ashore he told Edric that he was Peter, the keeper of the keys of Heaven and that in the morning, Edric was to take a salmon from his haul and to await the arrival of the Bishop and the King at the door of the little church and on presenting the bishop with the fish, he was to tell him that his journey was unnecessary as St Peter had already consecrated the church and as proof, to show him the twenty four crosses incised on walls of the church, the moisture on the floor from the Holy Water and in particular the wax dropped from the candles of the angels. St Peter required of Edric two promises, never to fish again on a Sunday and to pay a tithe of fish to the Abbey.

Such was the account recorded four hundred years later when in the 11th century Sulcardus, a monk at the new Abbey built by Edward the Confessor, sought to establish the independence of the Benedictine monastery from the jurisdiction of the bishop of London and the archiepiscopal jurisdiction of Canterbury. It was also the source of the demand from the fishermen of the Thames to pay an annual tithe of fish to the monks of the Abbey.

In 1212, Pope Honorius III, in an exercise to obtain centres of influence throughout Christendom, sought to select a number of major Benedictine monasteries to be exempt from episcopal control but to come under exclusive Papal jurisdiction. He sent his papal delegates from Rome to make the selection. It was also at this time that Bishop Eustace of London renewed his claim that the Abbot and his monks should be subject to the control of the Bishop of London. No doubt the monks of Westminster relied strongly on this legend of being of special concern to St Peter when arguing their case and it was successful. The Abbey joined the great Benedictine monastic houses at Bury St Edmunds and St Albans and became separate from London and Canterbury.

The Abbot was one of the Mitred Abbots who had to obtain confirmation of their appointment direct from the Pope and had the right to attend the Lords, still recognised today by allowing the Dean of Westminster to attend debates in the House of Lords sitting on the steps of the Throne.

This independence from the rule of the bishops of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury is demonstrated by the "Protest" which precedes the attendance of an archbishop on his first visit to the Abbey following his election when in the presence of the Dean and the Archbishop, the Legal Officer of the Abbey read the Protest with the words "*Whereas by ancient privilege it is not lawful for any Archbishop or Bishop to exercise any Ecclesiastical jurisdiction or perform any Episcopal function within the limits of the Collegiate Church of St Peter in Westminster without first obtaining leave of the Dean.*" Some Archbishops have not been amused by this "Protest" against their authority but today the Dean makes the Archbishop most welcome - as a guest.

When the Church of England broke with Rome under Henry VIII, the Abbey became subject to Royal rather than Papal supervision, a

relationship enshrined in the Royal Charter given by Elizabeth I in 1560, a charter which she conveniently forgot to sign. This oversight was remedied by her successor Elizabeth II recently with a new Charter granted to Her Collegiate Church of St Peter in Westminster.

One Archbishop on attending the Protest, expressed himself as "*Not amused,*" though with a smile on his face. However he has in a sense the last laugh in that there is exception to this denial of his right of entry, in that the Archbishop has by again ancient privilege, the right to attend the Coronation which the Abbey cannot gainsay and after six months of disruption by the preparations for the event would be foolish to do so.

But the Fish still has its place in the Abbey as once year the Dean and Chapter hold a Collegiate Dinner Jerusalem Chamber but though the table is set with the best china and cutlery, there is nothing to eat till there is a knock at the door and the Chapter Clerk having made enquiry reports to the Dean that "*There is a man without bearing a fish seeking admittance.*" No doubt anxious for something to eat, permission is granted for him to enter and the Master of the Worshipful Fishmongers Company enters with a magnificent salmon on a gold dish. The gift is accepted and the Fishmongers are invited to attend the dinner and in return the Abbey present them with candles, possibly as a reminder of the wax dropped by the angels on that momentous night so long ago, as a reward for honouring the tithe.

The occasion goes further as the Abbey Cellarer is required by the Dean to present to the fishermen - probably wealthy City financiers in fact, with ale and bread for their refreshment after their labours in catching the said salmon.

So the story of the Abbey as a Royal Peculiar may be said to one of a Tale of a Fish.

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