

Romsey Abbey; a Haven, an Educational Opportunity or a Place of Power?

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Catherine: Hello everyone and thank you for tuning into my HistBites podcast today where I will be talking about some of the royal women connected with Romsey Abbey. The period I am going to cover in this talk will range from the foundation of the Abbey in the tenth century up until the late twelfth century, exploring the lives of five royal women who were associated with the Abbey. Their status as royal women in this talk is not connected with their social position i.e as a queen or an empress but instead refers to their kinship to a royal bloodline as a daughter, cousin, aunt, etc. I have specifically chosen these five women because of the connections they had with each other, the way in which they were tied to the Abbey as an abbess or attendee and the reputations they had whilst they were there. I'm going to start with a little bit of history about the Abbey itself up until current day, give some background and context to the relationships royal women had with religious houses in the medieval period, before finishing with a discussion of my five chosen women.

The origins of the Abbey stretch back to the early tenth century when it was founded by Edward the Elder, the son and successor of Alfred the Great, in 907 AD. The first nuns settled here under Abbess Aelflaeda who was Edward's eldest daughter and it's possible that he built the church with his daughter in mind. It was refounded by King Edgar in 960 AD but destroyed by Danish armies in the late tenth century. The first stone nunnery and church was built around 1000 AD to replace the destroyed wooden buildings and it was in these walls that Romsey forged a reputation as a place of learning for the daughters of kings and noblemen. The church continued to grow and between 1120 and 1140 work began on the present building with the choir, transepts, a Lady Chapel and the first three bays of the Nave being built, with the fourth bay being added between 1150 and 1180.

In the fourteenth century, like so many other communities, the Abbey was decimated by bubonic plague and in 1349, there were only 19 recorded nuns left alive. The Abbey recovered somewhat in the fifteenth century as the plague declined and more building work was done to make room for the church of St Lawrence, built for the townspeople. However, the sixteenth century brought a brand-new threat to the Abbey in the form of the Reformation. This period was of course famous for the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII after his break with Rome and the Catholic Church in the 1530s to secure himself a divorce from his first wife Catherine of Aragon. Henry also used this as an opportunity to seize the wealth from the church and diminish its political influence. Romsey escaped total demolition during this time, possibly because St Lawrence's church was a shared religious space used by both the nuns and the public. Despite it still standing as a religious building, the nuns were dispersed, the Abbey inhibited, and the Lady Chapel destroyed. In 1544, the townspeople paid a hundred pounds to use the Abbey as their parish church and in 1643, during the early years of the English Civil War, more damage resulted in the Abbey when Roundhead soldiers entered and destroyed seats and the organ.

It was neglected during the eighteenth century but saw a resurgence during the nineteenth under the ministry of Reverend Edward Lyon Berthon, who rebuilt and repaired the building to how it stands today. It is now the largest parish church in Hampshire and whilst none of the original church nor the medieval buildings remain in full, the site still holds an impressive Abbey that has retained its importance in the community.

The connection between women and religious houses during the medieval period has been well established and is often a primary theme in biographical works on prominent royal women. Monastic communities offered both secular and religious women the opportunity to exercise authority and influence as abbesses and patrons but also allowed women to craft a pious identity which was important to the sway in their family and wider society.

One of the most common ways in which royal women were connected to religious houses was through their patronage and role as builders. Patronage came in many different forms. Perhaps most recognisably through gifts such as cloth and money, and also the granting of markets and fairs, granting lands or churches and granting them protections. It tended to be that when women built religious houses they would also serve as patrons for them, but they would also become affiliated with them for many other reasons – such as they were situated on land they held, were connected to their families or were home to influential individuals.

Many royal women also became abbesses of religious houses. Not all women were destined for marriage during this period and the connections families made with religious houses were often just as advantageous as some of the marriages arranged for their daughters. It was also common for women to retire to religious houses as widows.

Religious houses were a place of learning, and they were opportune environments for women to receive an education. Whilst they did not receive the same education as their male counterparts, women were expected to be educated in varied topics.

Many royal women in the central Middle Ages also forged reputations for themselves as pious women and this was important in the creation of their identities. Religion was a central part of society during this period and a woman's connection to the divine showed her to be a worthy role model for those around her. This also allowed women to play a considerable role in the cultural transmission of objects, when they would send gifts of religious paraphernalia, commission books to be written by or on religious individuals and visit religious places.

Now, Romsey was home for a time to some well-known and not so well-known royal women who lived there either receiving their education or as nuns and abbesses. Aelflaeda, daughter of Edward the Elder, and Marie I of Boulogne both spent time there as abbesses and Christina, daughter of Edward the Exile, was possibly abbess for a time but was definitely recognised as being a nun at the Abbey up until she died. Edith of Scotland, who would go on to marry Henry I and change her name to Matilda (which is how I will be referring to her in this talk from now on) and her sister Mary of Scotland attended the Abbey together for their education. Now, the connection of these women to Romsey Abbey ran deeper than just receiving an advantageous education or being the abbess of a respected religious house – they were linked by familial ties.

As mentioned, Abbess Aelflaeda was the daughter of Edward the Elder. Christina, as daughter of Edward the Exile, was also the great-great-great-great granddaughter of Edward the Elder and a great-great-great niece of the first abbess of Romsey. She was also the maternal aunt of Matilda and Mary of Scotland, who were at the Abbey with their aunt as well as each other, and the great-great aunt of Abbess Marie. All five of these women could boast that they were descended from Alfred the Great, possibly the most well-known Anglo-Saxon monarch and widely associated with the city of Winchester which was only a mere twelve miles from the Abbey. But the family tree does not stop there – Matilda and Mary's daughters, the Empress Matilda and Matilda of Boulogne, would become involved in the civil war period coined as The Anarchy. These cousins would find themselves on opposite sides during this English civil war period with the Empress trying to reclaim her inheritance from the husband of Matilda of Boulogne, King Stephen, who was also the first cousin of the empress through his mother Adela of Blois, the younger sister of Henry I.

Now, whilst at Romsey, these women were a part of a community.

The first abbess of the Abbey was Aelflaeda, eldest daughter of Edward the Elder who reigned from 899 until 924, and was possibly whom her father built the church for. Though not much is known about her life biographically, William of Malmesbury does recognise that two of Edward's daughters became nuns with one taking the veil (becoming a nun) and a second in lay attire (this recognised her as someone who belonged to a religious group but was not a member of the clergy as nuns were). In her youth, it is likely that Aelflaeda was raised at the court of Winchester and received her education there, perhaps an education she utilised at the Abbey. When the Abbey was founded by Edward in 907 it would not have been unconventional for Aelflaeda to be the first abbess – after all her father had been the founder and her link to the royal dynastic line would have served the house well in terms of receiving royal patronage. Aelfaeda was not the only daughter of the King to belong to a religious house and her sisters actually remained rather close. It was her sister Aethelhild who would become a lay sister at Wilton Abbey in Salisbury, another influential religious house during the medieval period, and although this Abbey lies in the county of Wiltshire it shares a land border with Hampshire. Even closer to Aelfaeda at Romsey was her half-sister Edburgha who was a nun at St Mary's in Winchester and sainted in the late tenth century, becoming the patron saint of the church.

We're going to take a little time jump now to our next royal woman at Romsey Abbey to the late eleventh century and Christina, daughter of Edward the Exile. Unlike her ancestor Aelflaeda, Christina's father was not King whilst she was at Romsey, mainly due to his father Edmund Ironside losing the throne to Cnut the Great in 1016, which resulted in her father and his brother Edmund being sent to the Danish court in exile, and there was also the case of his unfortunate death in 1057. Christina was born in Hungary during Edward's years in exile but in around 1057 she would travel to England with her family before going to Scotland to live in the court of Malcolm III, her future brother-in-law. Her sister, Margaret, the future Saint Margaret, married Malcom in 1069 with whom she had many children and her two daughters would accompany Christina to Romsey.

Christina would make the journey from Scotland to Romsey in 1086 with her two nieces Matilda and Mary. It is not known at what age Christina came to Romsey but considering she travelled with her family in 1057 she must have been at least around 29 in 1086. It might be assumed that a woman of such a marriageable age and considerable familial connections to the House of Wessex through her father, the Holy Roman Empire through her mother Agatha and now the royal house of Scotland through her sister would be an advantageous marriage for any nobleman across Europe. There is no doubt that if Malcolm could have effectively used his sister-in-law to forge a political alliance, however, it would not have been a considerable shock either that Christina chose the religious life. As discussed previously, royal and noble women often chose to join the religious life instead of marrying and this frequently happened with the support of their family – a woman in the church could be just as influential and beneficial for her family.

Upon her arrival in 1086, it is not clear what position she held in the Abbey. There is no definitive date for when her potential predecessor Abbess Aelfgyfu died but it is possible that Christina's journey to the Abbey was sparked by the opening of the position of abbess. On the other hand, she may have chosen Romsey as her preferred religious house because it was where her nieces were going to receive their education. Christina is not listed on the *Nomina Sororum Hrumenensis Cenobil*, a list detailing the abbesses of the Abbey, but her royal lineage and status would make her an ideal candidate for the role. It does not get any clearer by reading chronicle sources as both the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and William of Malmesbury do confirm that she was a nun at Romsey, but they do not declare if she was an abbess.

Although her position in the Abbey was not entirely known, stories of her behaviour at the Abbey were arguably renowned, especially when it came to her treatment of her nieces and in particular Matilda. There were tales that Christina forced a nun's habit on Matilda as she grew up because she had become a great beauty and her aunt wished to save that beauty from the lust of any Normans who might catch a glimpse of her. There was a particular incident in 1093 when William II visited the Abbey and Christina made sure that Matilda was wearing her veil so that William would not view her a prospective bride. It is possible that Christina was genuinely trying to protect Matilda from an unfortunate marriage, and particularly in the case of William II if she saw the match as ill-advised, rather than attempting to force her into the religious life. But her actions were not appreciated by her niece nor her brother-in-law. Abbess or not, Christina spent the rest of her life at Romsey Abbey, despite some confusion in chronicles which place her at Wilton but she died around the turn of the century in 1100.

Our third and final abbess that I will be talking about today, Marie, was a short-lived abbess of Romsey but was nonetheless an important figure in the late twelfth century. Marie was the youngest daughter of King Stephen and Matilda of Boulogne and was perhaps always destined to be a religious figure. As a child she was placed with the nuns of St Sulpice in Rennes in the nunnery of Stratford in Middlesex and between 1150 and 1152 a new nunnery was founded for Marie by her parents in Lillechurch, but it was still linked to the nuns of St Sulpice. The new Abbey was built in Kent which was a part of her parents' lands in the Honour of Boulogne which they held through her mother's position as Countess of Boulogne. Sometime before 1160, Marie left the Abbey to become abbess of Romsey and with her connection to the previous English King and illustrious lineages through her mother and father, she was from the same royal stock as the abbesses before her.

Romsey was unfortunately not where Marie was to thrive as an abbess. In 1160, her brother William of Blois died with no heir, leaving her as the last surviving child of Matilda of Boulogne and therefore Countess of Boulogne in her own right. During that same year, it was said that William of Alsace abducted the abbess in order to force her into marriage with him so he could become Count of Boulogne. There has much debate as to whether or not she was a willing participant in this union with chronicler Matthew Paris claiming she was eager to marry Matthew but there was also the implication that Henry II had forced the issue. Many saw the marriage as a breach of canon law since Marie had taken her vows as a nun and was therefore not viewed as a marriageable candidate. The marriage was also viewed unfavourably by Thomas Beckett, who of course eventually fell out with Henry II in the 1160s over religious matters in the kingdom. Considering her previous religious devotion and her having taken her vows as a nun, it is probably unlikely that Marie would have been happy to leave the main life she had known to become a countess, especially when she had just secured herself the top position at one of the most prominent Abbeys in the kingdom. Marie and Matthew did however have two children – Ida, possibly named after her maternal great-grandmother, and Matilda possibly after her mother – which suggests that she consolidated herself with the marriage eventually and she fulfilled her duties as Countess of Boulogne by providing an heir.

After the death of her husband in around 1169 or 1170, Marie returned to the religious life joining the nunnery in St Austrebert near Montreuil and she sent her daughters to be raised by their uncle, Philippe Count of Flanders.

With Romsey's well-established reputation for educating royal and noble daughters, both Matilda and Mary of Scotland gained much during their time there.

Matilda of Scotland is possibly one of the most well-known royal women associated with Romsey Abbey as her time spent there receiving her education and the slight scandal surrounding her religious attire was well known by contemporary chroniclers.

As the daughter of a King, the expectations for Matilda's education would have been high so Romsey was arguably a good choice. She learnt about reading, writing, art and language (both Latin and French), she studied letters and of course the Bible. This varied education would certainly be an advantage for her when she became Queen in 1100 and likely fuelled her interest in books. Matilda would commission the Life of St Margaret to honour her mother and she owned many luxurious and expensive books. The pious nature for which she became famous for as a queen probably began with her mother, who was notoriously religious and installed the same values in her daughters and was likely furthered at Romsey. This piety arguably became her identifying characteristic to her contemporaries.

Despite her evident connections to piety and religion, Matilda had no intention of becoming a nun; a declaration she made vehemently clear when questions were raised over the validity of her possible marriage to Henry I. As I discussed earlier with Christina, Matilda was at Romsey with her aunt but she was less flattering about their time together and their relationship. Matilda claimed that her aunt was routinely unkind to her and she disliked it immensely when she would force her to wear religious attire. In fact, Matilda claimed that this actually led to her developing a loathing for the veil. However, there were numerous witnesses who had seen Matilda in a veil which led to them assuming that she was actually at the Abbey with the intention of taking her vows which brought into question whether or not she was actually free to marry Henry. Matilda was instrumental in fighting for her marriage to Henry to be granted and she herself declared that there was never any intention on her part or in the eyes of her parents that she would be going to Romsey for anything more than an education and she certainly had not gone with the view of taking the veil. There was also a story recounted of how her father had come to visit her at the Abbey and when he saw her dressed in the veil he had become enraged and he tore the veil off her head. Malcom had every intention of arranging a marriage for her which he could not do if she became a nun. Matilda's testimony proved good enough for those doubting her marriageability and she married Henry in 1100. Her denial of her status as a nun was arguably the first display of influence she was able to wield and her skill in a political and diplomatic situation. Besides, if the tales were believed to be true then Matilda was always destined to be a queen after she supposedly pulled on the headdress of her godmother Matilda of Flanders, the Queen of England, at her christening which was said to be a sign she would grow up to be a queen.

Although her time at Romsey was clouded, Matilda actually remained connected to the Abbey during her time as queen. In a charter granted between 1100 and 1106, Henry I granted to God, St Mary of Romsey and his wife Queen Matilda an annual fair at the feast of St Aelflaeda which was to last for four days and a Sunday market to be held with the same customs granted as the fair.

The last woman I want to bring to your attention in this talk is Mary of Scotland, second daughter of King Malcom and Queen Margaret and sister to Queen Matilda. She is perhaps the lesser-known sister of the two women but she was with Matilda at Romsey and left with her when they went to Wilton Abbey in around 1093 to finish their education. She would leave the Abbey in 1096 and not much was known of her until her marriage. Mary's marriage to Eustace III of Boulogne was arranged by Henry I, supposedly at the behest of her sister Matilda, and there was no controversy around this union in comparison to her sister. The details of Mary's time at Romsey are not recorded by English sources in the way that her sister's were, which suggests that perhaps her aunt did not force her to take the veil. Perhaps this was because she was younger than Matilda and not at the same marriageable age as her elder sister which meant she was not at risk of being noticed by men who came to visit the Abbey. It is also possible that the English chronicles focus more on Matilda because she was an English Queen.

So, some thoughts to leave you with at the end of this talk. Romsey Abbey was an incredibly important Abbey for women right from the time of its foundation in the early tenth century up until its semi-dissolution in the sixteenth century because it gave them a place to practice their religious devotion and it provided them with an education. Not only that but it was a connection between family, although perhaps that connection was not always looked upon the most favourably. Whilst the women I have discussed today were all united with the Abbey thanks to their kinship with its founder and first abbess, their experiences whilst they were in residence were so unique. The connections they had as abbesses and attendees hopefully have highlighted some of the roles women played within religious houses and have shown you the interesting connections between religion and women and how deep they run.

I hope you have enjoyed listening and have learnt a little bit about some of the women who have lived at Romsey Abbey, make sure to check out their website for more information on the church and their upcoming events.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, or click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.