

STORIES AND LEGENDS OF MILTON ABBEY

This series of stories and legends has been prepared to give the stewards of the Abbey of Milton some anecdotes which they can relate to visitors to make their visit more enlivening. The building and the area has a rich history of human wisdom, folly, generosity and self-centredness which brings it into the human scale. The list is not exhaustive and the tales may be embroidered to make them relevant to the individual visitors.

1. Edward the Elder and the shepherdess

The story goes that when King Alfred the Great was fighting to save the Kingdom of Wessex from the marauding Danes he sent his son, Edward, into the country to keep him safe. Edward stayed for a while with the Lord of Athelhampton where he was looked after by the reeve's wife who acted as his nurse and he became very fond of her.

Later in life when he was a young man he was in the area and determined to pay his old nurse a visit. While he was visiting her he met a young girl called Egwynna who some say came from Milton and was looking after the sheep. Edward fell in love with her and married her. They had two children before they separated. The first they called Athelstan and he in time became King of Mercia and King of Wessex and he united the two kingdoms. The second was a daughter who was probably called Edith and married the King of Northumbria.

2. Athelstan and his mother's funeral

We have heard how Athelstan's father Edward met and married Egwynna. There were those in the court of Wessex who did not think that Egwynna was a suitable bride for Edward and after he and Egwynna separated Edward married again and had more sons by his second and third wives. This led to complications with the succession but Athelstan was selected King of Mercia and a little later King of Wessex and went on to unite the two kingdoms as well as that of Northumbria.

The story goes that when Egwynna died the people of Wessex did not want her to be buried with the other members of the royal family in Winchester because they did not think she had been a proper queen. This upset Athelstan so he had her body prepared for burial and determined to bring her home to Milton for burial. Where her grave might be we have no idea.

3. Athelstan and Edwin

Athelstan was the son of Edward the elder by his first wife, Egwynna, and Edwin by his second, Ælflæd. Edward separated from Egwynna who many considered to be of too low a status to be his wife. The ambitions of Ælflæd for her children lead to a messy succession. Initially Athelstan was selected to be King of Mercia and Ælfweard, his eldest half-brother, King of Wessex. However Ælfweard died after only a month as king and Athelstan took over as King of Wessex, uniting both Wessex and Mercia. This was not popular with certain people in Wessex and they plotted to replace Athelstan with his second half-brother, Edwin. Edwin found it necessary to flee from England in a boat which unfortunately for him turned out to be less than seaworthy. He was lost at sea and drowned but his page survived and ended up in a monastery on the continent. One suggestion is that Athelstan founded the monastery at Milton in memory of his brother Edwin. It has also been suggested that Athelstan never married because he had seen how disruptive complex families could

be for the succession.

4. Athelstan and Brunanburh

There is a story that Athelstan, when on his way to fight against the Scots spent the night in the encampment on the hill overlooking where the Abbey was built. While he was sleeping he had a dream in which he beat the Scots and united the whole of England under his rule. This dream was so powerful that in the morning he set out full of confidence and after a march of several days confronted the Scots and their allies at the Battle of Brunanburh which was an outstanding victory for Athelstan and in thanks he founded the minster at Milton in memory of his dream.

5. Athelstan's gift

It is unclear if Athelstan's charter gave property to an existing community in Milton or whether he intended to found a new minster. We do not know if the endowment was in honour of his mother Egwynna, or in atonement for the death or in honour of the life of his half-brother Edwin, or in thanks for his success at Brunanburh. There may be an element of all three reasons. One suggestion is that he wanted to endow a minster in memory of Edwin and thought that Milton would be a good place and subsequently on his way to Brunanburh he stopped there to see how the establishment was progressing. It is possible that the original minster was where St Catherine's Chapel now stands and that the large earthwork behind the chapel marks the boundary of the original minster; it is far too substantial for a temporary overnight stop! The original charter which lists the property he gave was lost when the Abbey church burnt to the ground in 1309. The Abbot and monks put together, from their collective memory, a copy of their original charter and grant of lands and asked the king to confirm that it was correct. This he did.

6. The Vicar of Middleton

Before the idea of parishes was invented and parish boundaries laid out in England, one of the priests who lived in the minster at Milton would have provided pastoral care for the people in the immediate area and this arrangement was continued when the minster became a Benedictine Monastery. But as the local town of Middleton grew the monks came to realise that this was a distraction from what they saw as their primary task which was to be a place of worship and contemplation separate from the world. So in 1298 the Abbot and monks decided to provide a secular priest to look after the people of the town. But the Abbot made sure that this secular priest and all subsequent vicars, though not monks, were firmly under his control by requiring that they were obliged to swear an oath of obedience to the Abbot on taking up the post. This continued up to the Dissolution in 1539.

7. The great fire

Very early in the morning of the 2nd of September 1309 when it was still dark the monks were at prayer in the old abbey church with a violent storm raging around outside. There was thunder and lightning but the monks continued with their chanting unaware that one of the bolts of lightning had struck the wooden spire of the church, starting a small fire. The wind was whistling down the valley and it soon fanned that small fire into a raging inferno which destroyed nearly all the church and its contents. All that was left were a few badly scorched walls but all the treasures and records had been destroyed.

The monks were devastated and even the Bishop came from Salisbury to see the damage and to offer help to the community. Slowly the site was cleared and rebuilding work began about ten years later. But the monks did not build on the same site. They decided to build their new church slightly to the west of the original. Where possible they encased the walls of the old church in new or reused

stone to save time and money and so we have the magnificent building we have today. Building continued over the next two hundred years but the church was never finished and no nave was ever built.

8. William Middleton and the family fortune

Monks, when they took vows to enter the monastery permanently, gave all their possession to the community so they became common property. Abbot William Middleton came from a very wealthy family and when one of his relatives died he left his estate to the Abbot. Of course the Abbot was not allowed private property so he agreed with the Abbey Chapter that his inheritance should be used to fund the continuing building of the Abbey church and the running of the Abbey school. During Abbot William's time the transepts were built and the crossing vault constructed.

9. The grammar school

Benedictine monasteries have always been places of learning and often had schools where novice monks were taught before they took their final vows. These monastic schools were often opened to the upper echelons of the local population. So it was in Milton. Eventually the school was endowed as a separate institution (in 1521) with its own Master, who was often the secular priest employed by the Abbey to serve the needs of the local populace. This was fortuitous, for when the monastery was suppressed in 1539 the Grammar School was an independent charity and so survived. The school was moved by private act of parliament to Blandford when Lord Damer decided to clear the old town, and was established in East Street.

10. Monkish social services

At the time of the dissolution Milton Abbey was supporting thirteen widows, two royal pensioners and spending one tenth of its gross income on charitable works as well as providing an elementary food bank and medical facilities. These services had developed over time and though the royal pensioners (corrodies) were imposed by royal decree, the rest was all the result of the monks collectively seeing a need and attempting to relieve the suffering. When the monasteries were dissolved these social services in the main disappeared and people were left to their own devices. It was only in the time of Queen Elizabeth I that the first Poor Laws were passed which laid a burden on the parish church to support the poor in their parish.

11. John Tregonwell 1st

John Tregonwell I was born to a small farming family in Cornwall and studied hard to become a lawyer. He worked as a commissioner for Henry VIII in his divorce from Catherine of Aragon and subsequently became one of the commissioners receiving the surrender of monasteries. He took the surrender of Milton Abbey in 1539 and was so taken with the place and its estates that he persuaded Henry VIII to sell the property to him for £1,000 and a rent of £12 per year and the cancellation of his pension of £40 per annum for previous services. This was a real bargain for in the first year of his ownership the estate made a profit of over £1,000!

But John was a true survivor. Despite having worked to achieve the divorce of Queen Mary's mother, Catherine, he then managed to ingratiate himself with her so well that she knighted him. When Elizabeth I came to the throne he retired to Milton and lived there happily until the 1565. He was a true survivor in those turbulent times.

He is buried in the family vault which is under the north end of the high altar.

12. John Tregonwell 3rd

John Tregonwell was an adventurous young man. When he was very young his nurse took him up onto the roof of the Abbey to see some men who were working there. The story goes that when they got to the top of the steps to the roof, he spotted a rose which was growing in the stone work and leaned over to either pick it or to have a closer look. But he leaned too far and fell over the parapet. His nurse was terribly upset and ran all the way down the stairs and out round the south transept fearing the worst. But as she came round the corner she saw John, sitting on the grass chuckling and making a daisy chain. His petticoat had acted as a parachute and brought him down safely.

In memory of this remarkable escape John left his library to the Abbey to be enjoyed by the people of Middleton and it was kept in what is now the Lady Chapel at the end of the South Aisle where there is a plaque on the wall recording John's life.

Over the years the books were gradually lost. The last one "Foxe's Book Martyrs" was stolen from the Abbey some ten years ago.

13. The reredos statues

The magnificent reredos, so reminiscent of the one in the chapel of New College Oxford and built soon afterwards, was originally brightly coloured and each niche held a statue. We do not know when the statues were removed but we do know that the reredos was badly damaged. When Wyatt restored the Abbey for Joseph Damer he repaired it using plaster instead of replacing the damaged stone. Interestingly, the Tregonwell family who took over the monastic buildings after the Dissolution were Roman Catholic sympathisers and certainly protected many of the major features of the Abbey during the turbulence of the Reformation. However, we know from the Churchwardens' records that during the Civil War the Abbey was badly damaged. During the Commonwealth a man was employed for five days to remove rubble from the church. It is tempting to think that the statues were part of that rubble for there is no doubt that Middleton originally supported the Royalist cause.

14. Jacob Bancks and the pulpitum

By the early 1700's the sacristy had fallen into disrepair. In 1737 Joseph Bancks decided to demolish it and the Abbey kitchen which was also falling down and to use the stone to replace a wooden screen which existed between the arches of the church at the west end of the monks' choir. He built the stone pulpitum and then let the grammar school boys use the gallery he created as their seating in the church so that they could see all that was going on. Today the pulpitum houses the organ which was moved there in the 1970's from its original position in the north aisle.

The original wooden screen had a number of wooden panels on which were painted pictures of the apostles and of King Athelstan and Queen Egwynna, his mother. The best of the pictures of the apostles were subsequently moved in 1770 to All Saints' Hilton where they are on display in the tower.

15. John Damer and the blind man courtesy of Lady Hamilton

John Damer, the son of Joseph Damer lived most of his life in London where he was known for his high living. One night he attended a brothel with a blind friend and in the morning a dead man was found in the house. The dead man was identified by the blind man as John Damer! His body was placed in a casket and brought back to Milton Abbey where it is buried in the vault under the Damer monument. It is said that the casket was very heavy being lead lined. When the vault was last entered it was noted that John Damer's coffin was still particularly heavy. The inference being that John Damer, who was deeply in debt and whose father had refused to settle his bills, did not die in the brothel and that his coffin is full of stones. We have the diary of Emma Hamilton, of Nelson

fame, for the details of the story.

16. Harry Hambro and the sale

When Harry Hambro inherited Milton Abbey from his uncle Richard in 1891 it was encumbered with two large jointures. The first was for £3000 to be paid to his step-grandmother, Baroness Hambro and the second, for £1000 to his step-mother, Mrs Percival Hambro. This was all bearable but Britain was facing an agricultural depression and between 1892 and 1894 the rent income of the estate fell from £8000 to £6,500. Harry was in trouble. He managed to keep paying the £1,000 to his stepmother but could not maintain the payment to his step-grandmother who took him to court. The result was that Harry was forced into borrowing money until it became too much and he eventually had to sell. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that the purchaser was his uncle Everard. Everard Hambro had been a party to Baron Hambro's deed of 1867 which returned the Abbey to public use (along with Edward Rawlings, a partner in Hambro's Bank).

17. The sale of 1932 and the missing silver

In 1932 the Hambro family decided to sell the whole Milton Abbey estate because the annual income was, due to an agricultural recession, insufficient to provide the necessary income to the Dowager Lady Hambro. The sale was to be by auction and included all the contents of the house. On the night before the sale, the Hambro's estate manager realised that the Abbey silver was stored in the family safe in the house and if it was not moved it would be sold with the house. He quietly removed the silver and put it into the safe in St James vestry, Milton Abbas, where it remained for several years. It is now stored in safe keeping and is only brought out occasionally for special services either in the parish church or in the Abbey.

18. The mystery of the cloisters

When you approach the Abbey along the front of the mansion you will see on the end of the north aisle the outline of some arches. These are from the cloisters which used to be on the north side of the church. After the Dissolution, the cloisters were dismantled at some time and the stone work was reused. Some of the stonework found its way to Hilton, just up the valley, and now forms the north aisle of All Saints' church. Other parts of the cloisters were used to form a covered passage from what is now the Princes Room to the Slype Door.

It is odd that the cloisters are to the north of the Abbey because normal Benedictine practice was for them to be built to the south. Maybe the noise from the town would have disturbed the monks who used the cloisters for copying, reading and meditating and so they built them on the other side of the church.

19. Every monastery has a secret tunnel

Every monastery has a secret tunnel and many people believe that they were used to smuggle people in or out for nefarious reasons. Buried under the buildings to the north of the Abbots Hall there is reputed to be a bricked up archway leading to a tunnel which led from the Abbey down to the lake.

The Abbey kitchen stood to the north of the Abbot's Hall and was as in all Benedictine Monasteries a separate building as a fire precaution. The Benedictines were very clever with their water supplies and always channelled fresh water through the kitchens and laver before the reredorter. It is highly likely that the arch and tunnel is in fact the monastic drain taking water from the winterborne in the Delcombe valley through the kitchen, laver in the cloister and reredorter down towards the original Abbots Fishpond to the west of the church.

20. John Tregonwell's crypt

John Tregonwell's tomb is at the east end of the north aisle where the Chapel of John the Baptist used to stand. It is said that he and his family are buried in a vault behind that tomb under the north end of the high altar. If you look very closely at the stonework around that tomb you will see that it is comparatively rough: clearly something was there before. The outline of a blocked entry can also be detected.

21. The South Porch and Sacristy

On some of the estate plans drawn up when Joseph Damer bought the Milton Abbey estate there is an odd protrusion from the south aisle. This was commonly called the south porch, which had a low doorway into the main body of the church directly opposite to the door to the sacristy in the north aisle. This was quite a large building, about two thirds of the size of the south transept. It seems to be too large to have been merely a porch for shelter when entering the Abbey and may instead have been the lost parish church of St James which is known to have been on the south side of the Abbey or it could have been a couple of chantry chapels. The figure of St James in the Lady Chapel possibly came from this church.

The sacristy lay to the north of the north aisle and was entered from a small door in the north aisle. It was vaulted and the springing of the vaults can clearly be seen on the outside of the church. The sacristy and the south porch are of the same size. The outline of the whole building, if it had been completed would then have been similar to Salisbury Cathedral with double transepts.