

MEDIAEVAL MONKS

THE BISHOP OF NORWICH'S
VISITATIONS TO
ST MARY'S PRIORY OF
OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM
1494 TO 1532



INTRODUCTION

In 1061, Lady Richeldis had a vision of Mary, who asked her to build a copy of the house where she was living when the Angel Gabriel asked her to be the mother of Jesus. She built this in Walsingham. This was the start of pilgrimage to Walsingham over the next 500 years.

In order to look after both the little Holy House and the thousands of pilgrims who came to visit, an abbey was built and staffed by a company of monks. These monks lived in the adjoining buildings and were responsible for the church.

A wonderful document, in Latin, has been traced which details the visits from the Bishop of Norwich to the Abbey between 1494 and 1532. It gives a fascinating account of life in the Abbey as reported to the Bishop by the monks of the time.



Episcopal visits were normal, and the document from which the information has been translated contains the visit records of other religious houses in and around Norfolk in the 15th and 16th centuries. However, the scale of problems at Walsingham is remarkable for its severity.

Source material:

Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich, 1492 - 1532,
Ed. Jessop, Pub. Camden Society 1888

1ST OF SEPTEMBER 1494

On arrival at the Abbey for one of his periodic visits to religious houses and communities in the Norwich Diocese, it was evident to Bishop Goldwell that not all was well. While he was sure things were going badly, his visit notes are brief as it seems the brothers were too afraid to speak.

The words in italics have been translated from Latin.

One comment records that, '*The **Prior** does not dare to show the state of the house to all the brothers as he ought to do because certain of the brothers might then reveal it to the outside world,*' thus implying both mismanagement and distrust. There were complaints about the Prior not being impartial, favouring some brothers over others, and also that, '*Brother Alan Aylesham...complains to the Prior about the brothers in such a way as to disturb them*'. It appears that the '*accounts of the house*' were not being kept by the **cellarer**, and pointed remarks about the '*bread and service in the house [which] could well be improved,*' show additional discontent.

Bishop Goldwell, not being able to find further evidence of misdeeds, '*ends this visitation in peace,*' although he did leave some **injunctions** to be carried out by the Prior.

...panis et servitia in domo satis bene poterit emendari.



14TH OF JULY 1514

A full visitation was made by the Bishop to the Abbey in July 1514. Things were not good.

Brother Edward reported that *'the brothers are disobedient, cannot be corrected, blame one another and are arrogant'*. Brother Thomas agreed saying that *'Brother Robert...is disobedient and wanted to strike down the Prior yesterday'*. Also, Brother Richard reports that *'by reason of the lack of discipline, the juniors are even more insolent and less devoted to their books'*.

However, it seems that poor and threatening leadership was rife. Complaints about the Prior's behaviour abounded, with one brother commenting *'as long as I do no worse than our Father Prior does, he cannot rebuke me.'* The Prior is reported to have threatened the brothers to be careful what they said during the visitation *'as when he has done, I will take charge again...and I will see what you deserve then'*. Brother Robert reports that the Prior had also said *'All who favour me will be blessed, but those opposed to me be cursed'*.

Theft was also a problem. Brother Thomas commented that *'The Prior often goes on his own to the Chapel of the Blessed Mary when it is getting dark and, without knowledge of any of the brethren, and disposes freely of the money and small offerings received there'*. He was also accused of being *'wasteful in giving away the goods of the monastery without consent of the Chapter'* and funding a house for one of the Cantors, Great George.

...multa jocalia
substrahuntur per priorem
pertinentia capellae



14TH OF JULY 1514

One of the servants, Smythe, had a wife who was very close to the Prior. She was given *'the keys of the chambers of malt and corn and [took] away whatever she wants'*. She was given the *'best of the food and wine'* and *'rode on the Prior's horse to Canterbury'*. In addition, *'the Prior reveals to Smythe's wife all that is done in the Chapter House'*.

To make matters worse, the prior reportedly *'hit a farmer [who] died from the blow within a month'*.

The other brothers were not without blame. Brother William reported that three other brothers *'go out of the priory at night time and sit drinking and eating in John Smythe's house until the eleventh hour of the night'*. Brother Robert said that three further brothers *'stay up drinking at night and do not get up for Matins and that when they are there they sleep and slumber'*.

Furthermore, the food is criticised as *'the drink is mixed with salt'* and *'the food, which is less healthy and too meanly served'*.

The Bishops response was harsh. The Prior was told to dismiss John Smythe and Nicholas Marshall from the house within a week, and that he couldn't threaten the other brothers over what they had said. In addition, the Prior was to *'make a faithful account of the goods of the monastery'* by next Christmas. Reportedly, the Prior resigned shortly after the visit and was replaced.

Prior percussit agricolam
ex cujus ictu obiit infra
mensem.



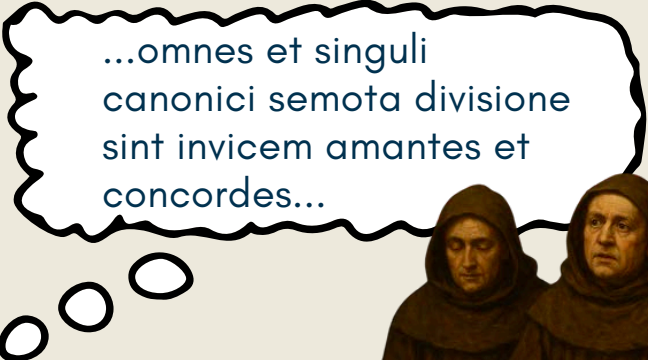
30TH OF AUGUST 1514

Following the somewhat disastrous visit in July, the Bishop returned to the Abbey in late August with a list of demands. The new Prior, Richard Vowell, had to sign and action them, witnessed by other learned people.

These demands were:

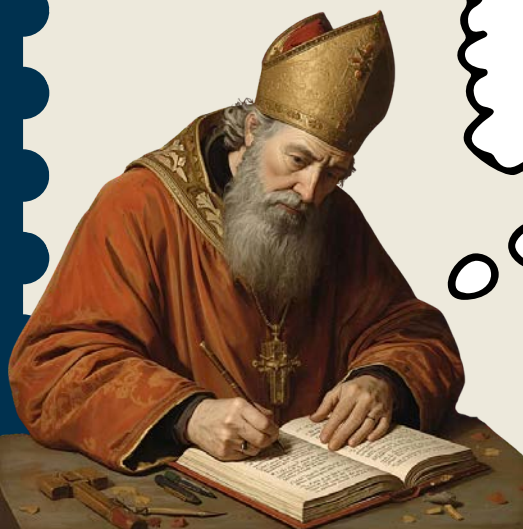
1. That the brothers should be *'loving and in concord'* and not insult or swear among themselves or at other people.
2. That the brothers, *'especially the juniors, should [not] have contact with any secular persons outside the...monastery'* unless it was official business and witnessed by another brother.
3. None of the brothers should leave the monastery to hunt.
4. None of the brothers *'should stay...eat or drink in any house within the village of Walsingham,'* unless authorised by the Prior.
5. *'...That the door of the treasury should be sealed with a double layer of wax, of which one of the keys should remain under the control of the Prior and another of an [elected] senior brother'.*
6. *'...on every Saturday, the Guardian of the Chapel of Blessed Mary* shall count such money and gold, as well as jewellery, rings and the rest offered during the week',* and account for it. These offerings to be kept in the Treasury, other than the jewels, which are returned to the chapel.

This set the tone for the brothers going forward for the next 6 years, although it was not all plain sailing...



...omnes et singuli
canonici semota divisione
sint invicem amantes et
concordes...

*The Holy House



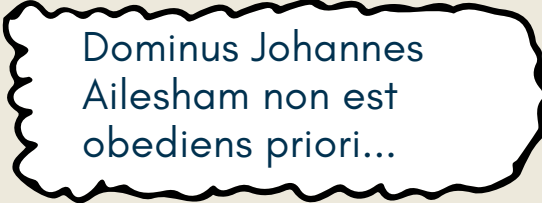
13TH OF JULY 1520

A return visit to the Abbey by the Bishop saw the then Prior, Richard Vowell, *'strongly object to the disobedience of the brothers,'* complaining that they were not observing the Bishop's **statues** nor the religious rules. While the report is much shorter than that of July 1514, it is clear that there were still problems.

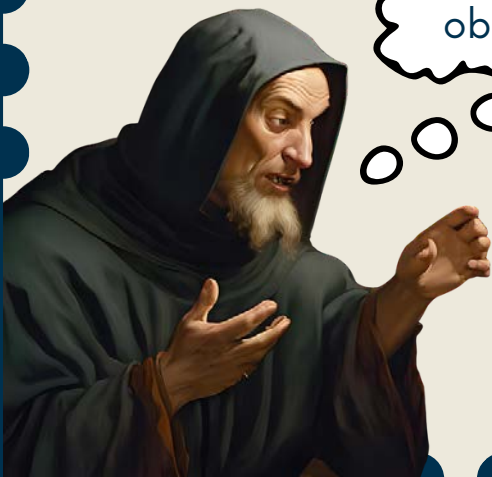
The subprior, Brother Edmund Warham, praised the Prior saying he *'properly and discretely performs his office and faithfully carries out those duties which appertain to him'*. However, he commented, many of the brothers remain disobedient, *'both protesting against and contradicting the warnings and desires of the Prior'* in household and religious matters.

Brother Thomas reported that Brother John Ailesham *'is not obedient to the Prior'*. He goes on to list a number of other brothers who are also *'disobedient and think only of themselves'*.

The Bishop *'ordered seven of the offenders to submit themselves and to ask for pardon, whose names appear on the list. That for the next seven days, they should hold and occupy the lowest places and offices in **choir**, that they should fast on the coming Friday on bread and beer, and, on the same day...should say the Lord's Prayer five times, kneeling together before the High Altar'*.



Dominus Johannes
Ailesham non est
obediens priori...



11TH OF AUGUST 1526

Six years later, the Bishop visited the Abbey once more. While many issues seem to have been resolved in the intervening years, there were still problems to be dealt with, mainly concerning the younger brothers.

Brother Robert *'says that the juniors do not have a teacher to educate them'*. Brother John Clenchewarton agreed, adding *'they do not have any of the brothers studying at the university...and the junior brothers do not have a master to instruct them in grammar'*. Additionally, the novices *'have not been professed'*.

There were still complaints about the food as Brother Thomas griped that *'what they are given to eat and drink is rotten and unhealthy, the fault of the servants'*.

However, despite these worries, Brother Nicholas Mileham, the **subcellarer**, *'says that all is done well and is worthy of praise, both in spiritual and temporal matters'*.

...non habent praeceptorem ad erudiendos juniores.



9TH OF AUGUST 1532

In the final visitation to the Abbey from the Bishop of Norwich, before the Abbey was dissolved in the Reformation, a much better picture emerged. Finally, the Prior was able to present '*an account with an **inventory***', and they can report to the Bishop that '*all is going well*'.

In the main, everyone questioned agreed that things were much improved, although Brother William still had complaints about the food, which '*is served very meanly to the Brothers*', and about two other brothers who '*do not get up for Matins*'.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Following the final recorded visitation, Henry VIII sent his soldiers to take control of and ultimately destroy the Abbey in 1538. Not all the monks agreed, and some were murdered for their beliefs and refusal to accept Henry VIII as head of the Church in England



Omnia bene



GLOSSARY

Canterbury	A major place of pilgrimage in the southeast of England.
Cellarer	Monk in charge of the money and belongings of the Abbey.
Chapter House	A room where decisions about the running of the Abbey were made and religious ideas discussed.
Choir	The part of the Abbey church where the monks would sit for services (and often sing).
Concord	Agreement.
Corn	In medieval times, used to mean all sorts of grain such as wheat, barley, oats etc.
Episcopal	To do with the Bishop.
Injunctions	Things which the Bishop demanded were done.
Insolent	Rude
Inventory	A full list of all that was owned by the Abbey.
Malt	Grain which had been soaked, started to germinate then roasted. Used to flavour ale.
Matins	A service of morning prayer
Prior	The head monk, the one in charge.
Statues	Orders or demands
Subcellarer	The deputy cellarer

LATIN PHRASES

...panis et servitia in domo satis bene poterit emendari.

...the bread and the service in the house could well be improved.



...multa jocalia substrahuntur per priorem pertinentia capellae.

...many of the jewels belonging to the chapel have been taken
by the Prior.



Prior percussit agricolam ex cujus ictu obiit infra mensem.

The Prior hit a farmer and he died from the blow within a month.



*...omnes et singuli canonici semota divisione sint invicem
amantes et concordés...*

each and every one of the canons, far from schism,
should be loving and in concord



Dominus Johannes Ailesham non est obediens priori

Dom John Ailesham is not obedient to the Prior



..non habent praeceptorem ad erudiendos juniores
the juniors do not have a teacher to educate them



Omnia bene

Everything is good

