



16th Century cottages at Wherwell, built in the reign of King Edward VI. By this time the Abbey was dissolved, and the nuns pensioned off. Pictured in 1933, before restoration.

— Bing Crosby Collection

# Home for Saxon queens of England

**THE EARLY** history of Wherwell is clouded by myth and legend, fostered by early Norman historians; some have a basis of historical proof. Certainly an Abbey was founded there by the widow of King Edgar; Elfrida.

Of Wherwell Abbey, there are no remains whatever, but the site of the Abbey was undoubtedly the ground upon which the present Priory stands. The history of the Abbey of Holy Cross and St Peter is the history of the parish down to 1540, as the parish hardly had a separate existence so long as the Lady Superior of the Abbey was Lady of the Manor and owned the whole village and a large part of the neighbourhood.

There was, however, a manor in the parish of Wherwell which did not belong to the Abbey, mentioned in the will of King Edred, who died in 955. He bequeathed Fullerton Manor (Fugelerstune and Fughelerton at various times in history) to Peter's or Hyde Abbey, Winchester.

The monks of St Peter's were vigorous opponents of William I who took this manor from them, without payment, and gave it to one of his knights. The manor of Wherwell itself was bequeathed by the widow of King Edred to her nephew, King Edgar.

Edgar's widow, Queen Elfrida founded the Abbey and her son, King Ethelred, endowed it with land and other property. At the time of Domesday the Abbey owned all Wherwell, except Fullerton the parish of Tocking-

By George Brickell

Little Ann, Middleton (Longparish) and Bullandun (Bullington) as well as 31 houses and a mill in Winchester.

Wherwell Abbey also provided a haven for two other queens renowned for their beauty. It was a place of refuge for the daughter of Duke Richard, known as the Pearl of Normandy, who afterwards married Ethelred II, and upon his death took Canute for a husband. She survived him and was buried under the name of Lady Aelfira Emma.

Then Edward the Confessor sent his wife (known as the Gentle Edith) to Wherwell to escape troublous times, but it would appear from the study of the chronicles of those days that Edith was too gentle to suit her husband, and as her sister was Abbess of Wherwell and a strong-minded lady, she was sent there with only one waiting maid to attend her in the hope of roughing up some of the gentleness.

However, her father, the celebrated Earl Godwin, returned from the wars the following year, and he made inquiries from the King as to where his daughter was in such a forcible manner that Edith

travel, and took up her position again as Queen.

Wherwell appears to have acquired a reputation for dealing with refractory young ladies who would not marry the man their guardians had with much trouble looked out for them. In 1243 Isabella, daughter of Robert de Akeni, was detained there by order of the King, for insubordination, but the next year she apparently gave in, and the King sent Mazzio de la Marr to take her from Wherwell to her future home.

In the 13th Century Elfrida's foundation flourished under Euphemia, of whom it is recorded that she 'seemed to have the spirit of a man rather than a woman... she with maternal piety and careful forethought built, for the use of the sick and the sound, a new and large farmery (infirmary) away from the main buildings.

Beneath the farmery she constructed a water-course through which a stream flowed with a sufficient force to carry off all refuse that might corrupt the air'.

A new use for the bubbling springs or whirling water which gave Wherwell its name, Old English hwer, 'Kettle, cauldron' and Old English Welle, 'a spring'. Similar phenomenon existed at Shepherds Springs. Andover. and