

Facts and legend of Saxon Wherwell

THE QUATERCENTENARY anniversary of the sailing of the Spanish Armada in 1588 encouraged historical research into contemporary archives. The resulting spate of books and TV programmes radically changed views of the event.

This is only a continuing process of re-writing history accelerated over the past decade by the facility of computers to store masses of information which can be cross-referenced, analysed, compared and evaluated.

Particularly vulnerable to critical re-examination are the Saxon and Norman periods. The historians then were monks, and the struggle for power between Church and State involved the distortion of historical events, the invention of others and the denigration of previous monarchs at the behest of their successors.

The early history of Wherwell is clouded with what, at best, must now be regarded as myth and legend.

William of Malmesbury, a Norman monk (c 1095-1143) writing nearly two centuries after the event, records the events leading up to King Edgar committing murder.

'There was in Edgar's time one Aethelwold, a nobleman of celebrity and one of his confidants, him the King commissioned to visit Elfrida, daughter of Orgar, Duke of Devonshire (whose charms had so fascinated the eyes of some persons that they commended her

By George Brickell

to the King) and to offer her marriage if her beauty were really equal to report. Hastening on his embassy and finding everything consonant to general estimation he concealed his mission from her parents and procured the damsel for himself.

Returning to the King he told a tale which made for his own purpose, that she was a girl of vulgar and common-place appearance, and by no means worthy of such transcendent dignity. When Edgar's heart was disengaged from this affair, and employed on other amours some tattlers acquainted him how completely Aethelwold had duped him by his artifices. Driving out one nail with another, that is returning him deceit for deceit, he showed the earl a fair countenance, and, as in a sportive manner appointed a day when he would visit this far-famed lady.

Terrified almost to death with this dreadful pleasantry, he hastened before to his wife entreating that she would administer to his safety by attiring herself as unbecomingly as possible, then first disclosing the intention of such a proceeding. But what did not this woman dare? She was hardy enough to deceive the confidence of her miserable lover, her first husband to adorn herself at the mirror, and to omit

nothing which could stimulate the desire of a young and powerful man. Nor did events happen contrary to her design for he fell so desperately in love with her the moment he saw her that dissembling his indignation he sent for the Earl into a wood at Warewelle under the pretence of hunting and ran him through with a javelin.'

The anecdote is a good one, though detrimental to both Edgar and Elfrida, and led Colonel Iremonger in 1835 to erect a monument — Deadman's Plack — in Harewood Forest to record the event. However, Aethelwold, the victim of Edgar's wrath, continued to witness documents long after his supposed death, and Elfrida's marriage!

The fact that Edgar married Elfrida and their son being afterwards King Ethelred II is beyond dispute. Also the murder, at the hands of Elfrida, of her stepson Edward the Martyr at Corfe Castle so that her own son could become king.

It is recorded that as a proof of penitence for the bloodshed in which she had been concerned Elfrida in 986 founded Wherwell Abbey for Benedictine nuns. This was to provide a home or the quiet resting place of at least three, and possibly four, English Queens.

William of Malmesbury provides a near contemporary record when he writes '... The abbey of nuns at Warewel was also burnt by one William de Ipres, an abandoned character who feared neither God nor man, because some partisans of the Empress had secured themselves within it'.

A memorial of the Abbey; now entirely disappeared; is supplied by a monument dug up in the churchyard more than a century ago, and then built into the churchyard wall (now removed into the church) of an Abbess, possibly Joan Cotterill (1361) or Cecilia Lavington (1375).

The rich Abbey of Wherwell was dissolved in 1540, the nuns receiving pensions, and its estates acquired by Sir Thomas