

The Ladies of the Minories

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THE FRANCISCAN ORDER for women, the *Sorores Minores*, otherwise called the *Minoresses*, Poor Clares, or the second order of St Francis, was founded in 1212 by the disciple of St Francis, Santa Chiara (or Clare), a native of Assisi, and like her mentor, of good family. Vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, the Franciscans and Clares were mendicant orders and as such were more exposed than others to the public, their lives being more in touch with the laity. The Franciscans had a good record of university education, good libraries, and zeal for learning. It should be noted that nuns were not in general expected to be as learned as the men. Few may be seen as artists or writers. The nunneries, unfortunately, produced no chroniclers. In pictures the nuns may be seen to have breviaries, whereas the men know the liturgy by heart.

The Franciscans were accused of excessive intimacy with noble families, and the mendicants were undoubtedly beloved of the laity, chosen by them to confess and absolve them, and to dispose of their property, and they were very successful in securing the corpses of the great for burial, together with the consequent oblations. This did not endear them to their rivals. Answering Franciscan criticisms of the Dominicans' pride, the latter retorted that in spite of their pretensions to asceticism, the Franciscans 'went barefoot, but ate meat'.

Before considering the House of the Minoresses without Aldgate and some of its inmates, it would be wise to examine briefly the quality of monastic life—always remembering that virtually all surviving accounts of the life of the religious in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century England were composed by their enemies.

It must not be assumed that in monastic life seclusion from the world was generally operative. Vowed men and women were allowed to travel, provided it was in the company of companions of the same order—each to watch the other. Some nunneries permitted regular yearly holidays—again with a companion, a different one for each visit. These could be of a month's duration (visits to distant relatives, for example), longer periods being allowed for illness. Servants, cooks and pets, were permitted.

There must have been bad characters among nuns as there undoubtedly were among the monks. The denial of sexual appetite was unnatural, temptations were strong. Even St Francis, driven by lust, was wont to dive into a snowdrift . . . if available. A manuscript illustration in the Bodleian Library shows a Poor Clare confessing to a Franciscan, their heads close together. Behind the friar may be seen the penitentiary birch for her correction. The point need not be laboured, but there was always a possibility that such punishment, delivered by a member of the opposite sex—perhaps zestfully—might often have gratified rather than mortified the flesh. Offence and absolution

went hand in hand. Erasmus' claim that chastity was more endangered within the cloister than without was not an isolated criticism. In 1497 the Doge of Venice declared that many convents were little more than houses of assignation. It is well to remember that although nuns were as a rule more separated from the community than monks, the English were in this respect the exception. In 1489, the Prioress of Nun Appleton in Yorkshire was ordered to see that none of the sisters used the alehouse, or the waterside (the latter for bathing).

In a nunnery, then, appetites, however recondite may well have been easily gratified, and—not too surprisingly—evidence of monastic surrender to Eros is comparatively slight until the arrival of these very mendicant orders in the thirteenth century. By the late fifteenth century, monastic houses, especially of women, were sexually lax. Contributory must be the fact that nuns, as women, were not expected to work hard, physically or mentally. In the late fifteenth century therefore, although we know little, precisely, of the day to day life of the Poor Clares of the Minories, we may suspect that here, too, the ladies—both religious and secular—were permitted pets, and kept their cooks and other servants.

We must not, however, reject the fact that many religious women were genuinely devout, and that many secular inmates of such religious houses sought therein solace. It would be hypocritical as well as unkind to condemn such well-born women as were consigned to a life of even partial seclusion, with its denial of motherhood and home, for seizing such of life's pleasures as were available. We should consider also the miserable dilemma in which a devout religious person was placed by the Suppression. As early as 1530, it was declared by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Durham, and others, that 'noo parson [person] may make a vowe or promyse to lyve chaste and syngle; And that noon is bounde to keepe any suche vowes, but rather to breke them'. As one might expect, although few monks elected at the Dissolution to remain in the religious life, the nuns of England (and in this respect the contrast with the readiness of continental nunneries to disband is marked) showed a desire to remain in the monasteries where they had taken their vows.¹

The Abbey of (the Grace of) the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Francis (The Minoresses) was founded by Edmund Duke of Lancaster, brother of Edward I, for nuns brought to England by his wife Blanche, widow of Henry le Gros, King of Navarre, in 1293. In 1295, the abbey was taken out of the Portsoken Ward and it was thereafter reckoned as being without the City boundaries. It was separated from the Tower of London by the Abbey of St Mary Grace, or 'East Minster' (now the site of the Royal Mint), a sizeable group of buildings on Tower Hill. This Cistercian house, a 'new abbey' (founded in 1349) never flourished.

The abbey of the Minoresses was very large. The church had a long and lofty choir, a short nave, and a south transept. From the north side of the nave rose a tower crowned by a handsome lantern, and beyond to the north were cloisters and a hall.² Gateways to the south (near the east end of the choir) gave access to the precinct wherein were imposing dwellings. The 'great house within the Close' appears to have stood immediately to the east of the cloisters. To the west were the City walls and ditch. By crossing the ditch by a drawbridge and passing through the Postern Gate, one could reach the monastery of the Crutched (Crossed) Friars, near whose domestic buildings (a few yards

to the south) stood the scaffold on Tower Hill, the site of which is now marked on the green within the railings of Trinity Square Gardens. To the north of the Minories stood the previously mentioned church of St Botolph's, Aldgate, whence a bridge over the ditch led via Whitechapel to the large Priory of the Holy Trinity.

Elizabeth de Burgh (d. Nov. 4, 1360) was buried within the church of the Minories, and her tomb must have been a magnificent one for in 1372 John Hastings, Earl of Pembroke (d. 1376) willed³ that his tomb in St Paul's was to be 'as like as possible to the tomb of Elizabeth de Burgh who lies in the Minories London without Aldgate'. For his tomb he provided £140. Among the benefactresses of the abbey were Alice FitzPiers (d. 1395), widow of Sir Thomas West, Eleanor Duchess of Gloucester (d. 1399),⁴ whose husband, Thomas of Woodstock, was murdered (probably) at Calais in 1397 (she left to her daughter, Isabel, one of the sisters there, a bed, etc.), and Joan (Meynell, Lady Clinton d. 1457).

Some of the inmates of the Minories during the period following the fall of the House of York have been briefly noted by Dr Tudor-Craig (see Note 15). They are described below with more detail, explaining the connections between them and suggesting some new identifications.

Elizabeth, Dowager Duchess of Norfolk, daughter of John Talbot, 1st Earl of Shrewsbury, and sister of Lady Eleanor Butler. She was the mother of Lady Anne Mowbray, child bride (in 1476) of the infant Duke of York, Richard, the younger of Edward IV's two surviving sons. The Duchess became a tenant of the 'great house within the close' of the Minories in 1487-8.

Jane, widow of Sir Humphrey Talbot, brother of the Lady Eleanor Butler, and son of the great Earl of Shrewsbury by his second wife Margaret, daughter of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick. Sir Humphrey was for long Marshal of Calais. He died on Mount Sinai in 1494, having, in his will of 1492,⁵ requested prayers for the prosperity of his sister, the Duchess Elizabeth. Jane, like the wife of Robert, Lord Willoughby de Broke, was the daughter of John Champernown, of Devon. She died in 1505, her sister-in-law, the Duchess, being her executrix.

Anne Montgomery, widow of John Montgomery, executed in 1462, brother of Sir Thomas Montgomery. Sir James Tyrell was her nephew. The daughter of Robert Darcy of Maldon, Anne Montgomery was clearly a person much respected, even revered. The Duchess Elizabeth, in her will of 1506,⁶ asked to be buried 'in the Nuns' quire of the Minoreesses without Aldgate . . . nigh unto the place where Anne Montgomery is buried'. 'A similar request had been made the year before by Jane Talbot.'⁷ Although in his will Sir Thomas Montgomery had, on 28th July, 1489, asked for prayers for her soul to be said in the Abbey on Tower Hill (St Mary Grace), she was alive in 1496 when she released all her right in the manor of Chalton, Hants., in favour of her sister-in-law, Alice (Langley).⁸

Mary Tyrell. Almost certainly one of the sisters of Sir James Tyrell—probably the youngest—therefore a niece of Anne Montgomery.

Joyce Lee. Believed by Dr Tudor-Craig to have been daughter of (Sir) Richard Lee, a London grocer. Yet Wedgwood's biography of this man names four daughters, none being Joyce. A Richard Lee, esquire (d. 1496) was one of the feoffees of Sir George Nevill and Mary Countess of Riversh is

wife (Anthony Woodville's widow), in the manor of Bardfelde, Essex.⁹ Sir George, as will be shown,¹⁰ was not unconnected with some of the later inmates of the Minories, and it would be very interesting were we to discover Joyce to have been the daughter of Sir George's feoffee. Sir Thomas More is said to have dedicated his first book to his 'beloved sister in Christ', Joyce Lee, in 1504-5.

Elizabeth Brakenbury. The younger of the two legitimate daughters and coheirress of Sir Robett Brakenbury of Selaby, Co. Durham, who was, from 17th August, 1483, Richard III's Constable of the Tower. Recipient of numerous grants and offices at Richard's hands, he died with his king at Bosworth. Elizabeth's poverty is apparent in her will made in 1504,¹¹ and it is clear that she found shelter under the wing of the Talbots—not the Howards, as Canon Raines asserts, apparently misled by the will of the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk in *Testamenta Vetusta*, where it is wrongly identified as that of the first wife of Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. From Elizabeth's will we learn that Sir Edmund Jenney, Sir Robert Southwell, and Dr Cosyn, were seized to her use of the manor of Selaby. This must refer to her interest in Selaby, for by entail Selaby was secured to Sir Robert's nephew and heir male, Ralph Brakenbury. Her debts were to be paid, all such money 'as my lady's grace of Norff' to whom I am most specially bounde' had paid, or was charged with, for Elizabeth 'of her charitie' was to be repaid. A priest was to sing for her. William Bolton, Clerk and Master of the Chancery (present when Richard III gave the Great Seal to Bishop Russell as Chancellor, 27th June, 1483), received the only real bequest, ten pounds 'and if my goodes may not stretch, x marc'. She asked to be buried in the monastery of the house of the Minories. The Duchess and Cosyn were her executors. She was dead by 22nd November, 1504, administration being granted to Cosyn.¹²

Some connection there was between Sir Robert Brakenbury and Sir Thomas Montgomery,¹³ which could, partly, explain his daughter's connection with these ladies, although it is not certain that Brakenbury's daughter was an inmate of the Minories while Anne Montgomery was alive. In 1489, Anne (or Joane) and Elizabeth Brakenbury successfully petitioned for the reversal of their father's attainder. From this petition we learn that Sir Robert had a bastard son who was to inherit should the sisters die without lawfully begotten heirs.¹⁴ The cost of securing such reversal may well have been ruinous, however. Elizabeth did not, it seems, ever marry, and the Minories, thanks perhaps to Elizabeth Talbot, may have been her salvation.

All of these ladies, with the possible exception of Jane Talbot and Joyce Lee, had suffered great loss, but it would perhaps be unwise to think too much of them as sheltering in the Minories, where life may not have been too severe. They may, as Dr Tudor-Craig suggests, have gathered around the Duchess,¹⁵ yet Anne Montgomery's influence may have been greater, spiritually. Elizabeth Brakenbury apart, they appear to have been injured more by Edward IV and the Woodvilles, than by Henry VII.

The Duchess of Norfolk was forced to accept a diminished dower in order to augment the revenue of her son-in-law, the younger son of Edward IV, whose marriage to the infant Anne Mowbray ensured that the vast Mowbray inheritance would pass to this son of Elizabeth Woodville, whose own marriage to Edward IV had ruined the duchess' sister, the widowed Lady Eleanor

Butler. If to the betrayal of Eleanor Butler we add the probably unjust executions of William Tyrell and John Montgomery, it will be seen that three of these ladies had little cause to love Edward IV—or his queen. Certainly unjust were the attainder of Sir Robert Brakenbury, and the execution and attainder of Sir James Tyrell, injuries suffered at the hands of Henry VII.

When the young Anne Mowbray died, in 1481, she was buried in the Chapel of St Erasmus in Westminster Abbey. This chapel was demolished, c. 1502, to make way for Henry VII's own lavish mortuary chapel, and the little Duchess was re-buried in the Minories possibly at her mother's request. In 1964 the remains of Anne Mowbray were found by an excavator driver in a vaulted burial chamber on the Minories site.

In addition to these ladies, there was at least one other inmate with tragic White Rose connections. This was Edmund de la Pole, nephew of the Yorkist kings, and younger brother of the unfortunate Earl of Lincoln who died at Stoke Field, on 16th June, 1487. He succeeded his father, John de la Pole, as Duke of Suffolk in 1491, but on 26th February, 1493, he was forced by Henry VII to renounce this title (and, apparently, the marquessate also), and was thenceforth Earl of Suffolk.¹⁶ In 1491 he was at the siege of Boulogne, in 1495 he was elected a Knight of the Garter, and in 1497 he held the bridge at Staines against the Cornish rebels. Described as a violent-tempered man, rash and headstrong (while at Oxford, however, his abilities were—perhaps diplomatically—praised), he was, in 1498, indicted for slaying a 'mean person' in anger. Acquitted, he seems to have resented the trial, and on 1st July, 1499, he left the country suddenly, going to Guisnes Castle, about 6 miles from Calais, on English territory, and the stronghold of Sir James Tyrell. Henry VII and Bishop Fox of Durham (Lord Privy Seal) instructed Sir Richard Guildford and Richard Hatton (who left England in November on a mission to the Archduke Philip), to break their journey at Guisnes, where they were to explain to Suffolk the king's affection for him and to persuade him to return—if possible with Sir James Tyrell.

They were partially successful. Suffolk returned, and was with the king when Henry met the Archduke Philip at Calais in 1500. The Captain of Hammes (the other fortress which guarded Calais), Sir Robert Curzon, had in 1499 been permitted to go to fight the Turks. There he impressed the Emperor Maximilian, who made him a Baron of the Holy Roman Empire. Encouraging the Emperor to criticize Henry VII and his crimes, he heard Maximilian say that had he, the Emperor, one of Edward IV's blood on his hands he would help him recover the throne. Curzon informed Suffolk of this, and in August, 1501, as Henry VII prepared to welcome his son's bride, Catherine of Aragon, he heard that Suffolk, with his youngest (and perhaps ablest) brother, Richard, had gone to join the Emperor in the Tyrol (see Appendix).

Less than a week before his flight, Suffolk had dined with the Marquess of Dorset, the Earl of Essex, and the son and heir of the Earl of Devon, William Courtenay, husband of Edward IV's youngest daughter, Katherine. Just before his departure, Suffolk dined with the Earl of Devon, who showed him great reverence.¹⁷ Lord William Courtenay, Suffolk's brother, William, and Dorset, were shortly afterwards arrested and committed to the Tower. William de la Pole was never to leave it, dying there at some time between 1538 and 1540. Curzon was publicly condemned with Suffolk, but he returned in 1506, with a

pension of £500 per annum. It can hardly be doubted that he was Henry VII's agent from the beginning.

Sir James Tyrell, as we will see, was shortly afterwards treacherously seized at Calais. It is not clear whether 'Pursevant Cursum', arrested with Tyrell, was some relative of Robert Curzon or not.

For several years Suffolk lived precariously, an exile on the continent, sometimes in prison, and occasionally in touch with such fellow-exiles such as Sir George Nevill, once one of Warbeck's principal supporters. Eventually he was surrendered to Henry VII by the Archduke Philip, on the promise that his life would be spared. On 15th March, 1506, Suffolk was handed over at Calais, and on March 14 he was paraded through London to the Tower. Henry VII spared him as promised; but enjoined his son to execute him. On 4th May, 1513, aged about forty-two, no proceedings having been taken against him, Suffolk was executed on Tower Hill. Before the month was out, Henry VIII paid the Provincial for his burial—in the Minories.¹⁸

At the beginning of Henry VIII's reign Suffolk's widow, Margaret Scrope (step-daughter of Sir John Wyndham, who had been executed with Sir James Tyrell and her sister, Elizabeth, Countess of Oxford, were among Queen Catherine of Aragon's eight ladies-in-waiting.¹⁹ Living, on 17th June, 1513, at Lullingstone, Kent (home of Sir John Pecche, who in 1495 rounded up Warbeck's supporters after the abortive landing at Deal)²⁰ she, in her (undated) will requested burial in the Minoreesses without Algate with my husband.²¹ Her death occurred in February, 1515. Suffolk's only child, his daughter Anne (or, according to the *Complete Peerage*, Elizabeth), was professed a nun in the Convent of the Minoreesses in July, 1510, barely two months, incidentally, after Henry VIII's sexual adventures with at least one of the queen's ladies were made known to Queen Catherine. Suffolk's daughter was probably one of the twenty-seven nuns, plus lay sisters and servants of the nunnery, who died at the Minoreesses of a pestilence in 1515.

As the scaffold on Tower Hill was less than 1000 feet away, The Duchess of Norfolk, Jane Talbot, Joyce Lee, Elizabeth Brakenbury, and perhaps Mary Tyrell, would have been able to watch from the tower of the Minories (if so inclined) the executions of Sir William Stanley (in 1495), of Lord Audley (in 1497), of the Earl of Warwick (in 1499), and of Tyrell and Wyndham (in 1502). Suffolk's daughter *could* have witnessed his execution in 1513.

There remained a century ago in Haydon Square a spring of the most pure and brilliant water which was formerly the convent fountain. On the site of the nunnery was built the Church of the Holy Trinity in the Minories. In this church was kept a mummified head, evidently decapitated, which is now in the church of St Botolph's, Aldgate. It is not certainly known whose head this was, although the name of Henry Grey, Duke of Suffolk, father of Lady Jane Grey (and descendant, of course, of the Marquess of Dorset—and of Elizabeth Woodville) has been suggested, perhaps because he had been granted the site of the Minories by Edward VI. He is not, however, known to have been buried there (although the link with the inmates of the Minories will be noted) and the probability is strong that the head in St Botolph's is that of the luckless Edmund de la Pole, and that it was (like that of Oliver Cromwell) 'mummified' by exposure—unless the head was re-united with the body soon after the execution.

There is, however, an even greater likelihood that the head is that of Thomas Lord Darcy, K.G., who on 30th June, 1537, when aged almost eighty, was beheaded for his participation in the Pilgrimage of Grace. He petitioned to be buried beside his second wife, 'the Lady Nevill' (Edith Sandys, widow of Ralph Lord Nevill, son and heir of the third Earl of Westmorland) in 'the Freers of Greenwich', but this was refused, and he was buried in St Botolph's, Aldgate.

It is unfortunate that when the coffin of Lady Anne Mowbray was unearthed in 1964, those in charge, ignorant of the historical significance of other burials recorded at the Minorities, did not trouble to search for other remains. It is doubtful, in any case, whether they could have been persuaded to delay—even temporarily—the obliteration of the site.

APPENDIX

In 1499 Louis XII of France expelled Duke Lodovico Sforza from Milan, which he, Louis, claimed as grandson of Valentina Visconti, Bernabo's niece. He was eventually defeated, on the Garigliano, by the great Spanish general, Gonzálvo de Cordova, in 1503. After Suffolk's surrender to Henry VII, his youngest brother, Richard de la Pole, sought refuge in Hungary. Before 1510, he styled himself Duke of Suffolk, and he was supported in his claim to the English throne by Louis in 1512. He commanded German Landsknechts in the invasion of Navarre in 1512, fought against Henry VIII in France (helping to defend Therouanne) in 1513, and prepared to invade England in 1514. Following the peace made with England in 1514, he was sent to Metz where he remained for several years. The French repeatedly refused to surrender him to Henry VIII. In 1522-3, he planned with the Duke of Albany a joint invasion of England. He was regarded as one of France's most distinguished commanders, and Henry VIII hailed with relief the news that 'the King's dreaded enemy', The White Rose,²² had been slain at the battle of Pavia on 24th February, 1525. The French king, Francis I, was taken prisoner. Richard de la Pole was buried in the Monastic church of St Augustine at Pavia, the victorious Constable de Bourbon (himself chief mourner) honouring him with a splendid funeral. This is the Lombard church of San Pietro in Cielo d'Oro (situated near the castle of Pavia), which contains one of Italy's great sculptured shrines—the Arca di Sant'Agostino—believed to contain the relics of St Augustine.

One more interesting historical parallel may here be noted. On the assassination of his father, Galeazzo in 1476, the infant Gian Galeazzo (grandson of the great Francesco Sforza) succeeded to the duchy of Milan under the regency of his mother, Bona di Savoia. This was the lady, sister-in-law of Louis XI, whose marriage with Edward IV was arranged by Warwick the Kingmaker in 1464, before the king's secret marriage to Elizabeth Woodville was made public. In 1481 the power was usurped by Gian Galeazzo's uncle, Lodovico 'il Moro'. This splendid patron of the Fine Arts was believed to have poisoned his nephew in 1494 and eventually in 1500 he was betrayed to the French by his Swiss mercenaries, and was taken by Louis XII. He died a prisoner at Loches, in 1508. Richard III corresponded with both Gian Galeazzo and Lodovico.²³ The parallels—not only of Richard III and Lodovico, but of Elizabeth and Bona—are striking and obvious.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

This article should be read in conjunction with one on Sir James Tyrell to be published in *The Ricardian* in December 1978. They were intended for simultaneous publication, but are separated for reasons of space. More light will be thrown on the Minories Ladies and the Tyrell connections in this second article.

1. For further information on these matters see: L. Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism*, Cambridge (1896); Mary Bateson, *Medieval England*, London (1903); Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, Cambridge (1922); Rotha M. Clay, *Some Northern Anchorites*, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, Vol. 33 (1955), p.215.
2. H. A. Cox, *Old London Illustrated: London in the XVIth Century*, 8th edition, London (no date), p.3.
3. N. H. Nicolas, *Testamenta Vetusta*, Vol. 1, London (1826), pp.87-88.
4. *Ibid*, pp.146-149.
5. *Ibid*, pp.409-410.
6. *Ibid*, p.483. Nicolas mistakenly identifies her as Elizabeth Tydney, first wife of Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey and 2nd Duke of Norfolk. She was never a duchess, dying before her husband's recovery of the dukedom.
7. *Ibid*, pp.471-472.
8. J. H. Round, *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, Vol. 15 N.S. (1921), p.51. For Sir Thomas Montgomery see this writer's article in *The Ricardian*, Vol. 3, No.51 (1975), pp-9-14.
9. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem Henry VII*, Vol.2, H.M.S.O. (1915), No.197.
10. See Appendix to Sir James Tyrell in *The Ricardian*, December 1978.
11. *Testamenta Eboracensia*, Vol. IV, Surtees Society, Vol.53 (1869), No. 129, p.233.
12. Dr Thomas Cosyn, Doctor of Divinity in Cambridge, also named as executor by Jane Talbot and the Duchess of Norfolk.
13. See *The Ricardian* article referred to in Note 9 above.
14. *Rolls of Parliament*, Vol. 6, London (1795), p.433.
15. Pamela Tudor-Craig, *Richard III*, National Portrait Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, London (1973), p.53.
16. G.E.C., *Complete Peerage*, Vol. 12, Part 1, London (1956), p.451.
17. J. Gairdner (editor), *Letters and Papers illustrative of the Reigns of Richard III and Henry VII*, Vol. 1, London (1861), pp.225-226. The Marquess of Dorset was of course the son of Elizabeth Woodville. He died in the following month, and was succeeded by his son.
18. That Suffolk's brother was in arms against Henry at this time has been advanced as an excuse for his execution.
19. Neville Williams, *Henry VIII and his Court*, London (1971), p.32.
20. *Complete Peerage*, Vol. 12, Part 1, p.453.
21. *Testamenta Vetusta*, Vol. 2, p.530. Sir John Pecche was one of the 'young minions' (boon companions of Henry VIII) whose banishment from court the Privy Council brought about in 1519.
22. *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian*, Vol. 1, H.M.S.O. (1864), p.410, No. 946 and note.
23. British Library *Harleian Manuscript* 433, ff.249, 250, both letters dated 10th February 1485.