

FOUNDATION OF THE ABBEY OF BEC

Herluin, the Founder of the Abbey of Bec, was born at Brionne c.995. His father, Ansgot, was descended from the Danes who settled in Normandy and his mother, Héloïse, belonged to the family of the Dukes of Flanders. After the death of his father, Herluin entered the service of Gilbert, Count of Brionne, whose vassal he was, and learnt the career of arms like any other nobleman of the period. His honesty and wisdom were rare qualities at that time and these coupled with his ability with lance and épée soon made him popular amongst the other noblemen including Robert, Duke of Normandy.

About the age of 37 however, he began to interest himself in religion and started to withdraw from court life, frequenting churches and spending his time in prayer and fasting. Although dissatisfied with his previous way of life, he still did not feel that he had found his true vocation since, at that period, a saintly life in Normandy was not an easy one to follow. The Normans still conserved many of the traits of their pagan Danish ancestors, with the clergy marrying and carrying arms like laymen. Herluin knew only that he did not want to become this sort of priest and since he could not immediately end the service due to his Suzerain, he remained at court but changed his lifestyle. With his long hair and wild beard, the once elegant knight and valiant warrior became the subject of the ridicule of the other Courtiers, especially when he exchanged his war horse for an ass! Herluin bore all this with humility until after three years events suddenly erupted with a crisis.

Count Gilbert was in dispute with one of his compatriots and ordered Herluin to plead his cause at the Duke of Normandy's court. Herluin felt himself unable to help bring about the downfall of someone else and refused point blank to go. Gilbert insisted and threatened but Herluin was adamant in his resolution not to compromise his principles and left the Court. The enraged Gilbert then ordered all his possessions to be confiscated and also started to illtreat the poor people who supported him. When he heard of this Herluin decided to return and try to explain his feelings to the Count, pleading with him to send him instead to a Monastery- *"Keep only your affection for me and give my body and goods to God"*. Gilbert was so touched by Herluin's plea that he agreed and also returned his part of the paternal heritage and that of his brothers Eudes and Roger. This comprised land at Bonneville on the plateau of the valley of Bec.

In 1034, Herluin decided that he would build a retreat on his part of the land and live the life of a hermit. During the day he worked on his cell, digging ditches and collecting stones and sand to build the walls. Except for Sundays and feast days he ate only one meal and at night he prayed and studied the scriptures, since he had reached the age of 40 without having learnt more than the bare elements of reading and writing. One can only admire the will power of this ex-warrior, already old, who wanted to become a mature monk before having been a novice! In order to learn more he took to visiting neighbouring monasteries and at one of them, a porter, seeing his unkempt appearance, mistook him for a thief and threw him out. At another monastery he was watching a procession of richly dressed monks when one of them struck him in the face and knocked him down. Such was his humility, however, that he accepted these rebuffs without complaint and went away! Although his original intention was merely to live alone devoting himself to his salvation, the abnegation and austerity of his life style soon attracted others of similar outlook and together they built a chapel which was dedicated by Herbert, Bishop of Lisieux on 24 March 1035. At the same time Herluin was given a tonsure and monk's habit. Later Herbert conferred on him the title of abbot which he accepted, after much resistance on his part, only because no one else would take

on the leadership of such a poor community! Characteristically he immediately gave all his possessions to the monastery.

investiture of an abbot



The life of these original monks was hard in the extreme. After performing the daily offices, the abbot, with his sack of seed grain on his shoulder and his rake in his hand, would lead his monks to the fields where they would work until nightfall clearing the scrub, carting dung and planting seed. Food consisted of rye bread and vegetables cooked in salt water, the water being muddy and having to be brought from a spring two miles away! After several years of privation, mainly due to the lack of good water, the monastery was moved in 1039 from Bonneville to the entrance of the valley of Bec, one mile from Brionne. The only advantage of this move was the proximity of the stream of Bec since the soil was no better. Two years later a church was built which was consecrated on 23 February 1041 and at the dedication, the young Duke William gave to the abbey the right of high justice and permission to build a town round the monastery. Wooden cloisters were also completed at this time but these collapsed soon after and had to be rebuilt in stone. The cost of this forced Herluin to go fund raising and the monks, left leaderless, soon began to quarrel amongst themselves. Faced with the dilemma of needing to leave the monastery to collect money, but unable to maintain order within the community whilst absent, Herluin sought God's assistance, and as if in response to his prayers, the Italian, Lanfranc arrived from Avranches in Normandy, where he had gained a reputation as an outstanding teacher. Lanfranc joined the community as a monk in 1042. Although Herluin himself was unlearned, he yearned after knowledge, and respected scholastic achievement in others. With his commonsense approach to life, he quickly realised that Lanfranc's academic expertise combined with his own more practical skills could be put to good use for the better management of the monastery. Thus, whilst Herluin using the expertise he had gained as a soldier, defended the monastery from attack, Lanfranc instructed his fellow monks in the scriptures. Lanfranc became Herluin's first effective assistant, and within three years of his arrival, Herluin appointed him as prior with responsibility for running the monastery.

Herluin encouraged Lanfranc to open an external school, to accommodate those attracted to Bec by the fame of his teaching. In 1060, Anselm of Aosta who was to prove an even greater scholar than Lanfranc became a monk at Bec, and in the years that followed, Herluin saw the humble and simple foundation which he had begun, develop into one of the most influential intellectual centres of the Middle Ages, under the guidance first of Lanfranc, and then Anselm.

By 1073, the community had outgrown its small church, and the building of a new one had begun. In 1077, Lanfranc by then Archbishop of Canterbury, whilst on a visit to Bec from England, consecrated the principal altar amid scenes of great celebration. Herluin, who was over 80, anxiously supervised the hospitality for the distinguished congregation which included bishops and local nobles. Overcome with joy, he repeatedly exclaimed, "What reward shall I give unto the Lord for all the benefits he hath done unto me?" The old abbot, who loved and respected his former prior, Lanfranc, above all other men, realising that he would never see him again on this earth, rode with him for the first two miles on his departure. Later, Herluin retired to his room, and allowing himself to weep, raised his hands to heaven and prayed, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen what I most desired to see before I die, and for which I have prayed to you continually". He died on 19th August 1078 after a long illness.

Gilbert Crispin, a monk at Bec from c.1055 until 1080, who later became Abbot of Westminster, wrote a moving account of Herluin's life. Crispin was a man of the new age of learning, yet whilst acknowledging the achievements of Lanfranc and the distinction of Anselm, he regarded his fellow countryman, the old knight Herluin as the greatest soldier of Christ in their congregation. To Crispin, Herluin embodied the true spirit of reformed Benedictine monasticism, a mixture of goodness, simplicity, service and eagerness to learn.

Sources: A.A.Porée; "L'histoire de l'Abbaye du Bec"
F.Barlow; "English Church 1066-1154"

