

A RYE RELIC OF AUSTIN FRIARS LONDON

When the first Augustinian friars came to England from France in the middle of the thirteenth century, the social structure of Western Europe was undergoing great changes, and men of religion were learning to adapt their ways to meet the peoples' new needs. In the West, under Benedict and Augustine, monasteries had begun in the establishment of refuges where the laity might retreat from the world's insecurity and the grinding poverty which were for the most part their lot, great bastions resisting the hordes of pagan invaders from the East, avid to put Roman civilization and its heirs to the torch and the sword.

These two founding fathers had demanded of those who offered to follow them a visible separation from the life which they were renouncing. That is not to say that they forgot the command to 'go out into the whole world'; but the first monks had regarded themselves as missionaries only secondarily. Those who wished to find in contemplative prayer a fulness of spiritual living should, they held, come 'into the desert' and join them.

Enough of Augustine's ideals, enshrined in his *Rule*, more adaptable than Benedict's, had persisted for the Tuscan Hermits to live in remote rural settlements; and when in 1248, eight years before Annibaldi's 'Grand Union', Gilbert Earl of Gloucester introduced friars to work in England and to follow Augustine's *Rule*, he housed them at the foot of his castle mound beside the river Stour in isolated Suffolk¹.

Yet the world of Gilbert and his Augustinians was no longer that which had surrounded the ancient monasteries. Commerce was replacing agriculture as a more lucrative pursuit. Towns were expanding; and the Clare friars were committed to mendicancy, the organized soliciting of alms, within defined and jealously-preserved districts, from layfolk able and prepared to support them. So, as more men were drawn to this new

¹ At the Great Union, the 'Hermits' of the Tuscan friars' style was retained in the new appellation, 'Augustinian Friars Hermit'; and the 'Hermit' has only recently been discarded. That the friars were so called, and were still in the thirteenth century living and working in remote country districts, accounts for their implied disparagement, as unskilled labourers, a dominant theme in the pseudo-Augustine *Sermones ad fratres in eremo commorantes*, which the present writer hopes to be able to discuss at an early date.

way of life, they were directed to houses in urban areas, where new money was being accumulated and might be distributed to them. The Austin friars, as also their fellow-mendicants — and, very often, their competitors — Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites — moved to the now thriving centres of this prosperity, which included, very early, London, and, a century later, Rye.

'Austin Friars, London' (though the friars themselves were driven out by Thomas Cromwell, and their buildings were totally destroyed in the Blitz, the name for the site is still current) was founded out of the patronage of the Bohun family, earls of Hereford and Essex; but in 1354 the first church was completely rebuilt. A photograph of the 1920s shows the beauty and opulence of the second edifice². It was 'built of ragstone and chalk, with dressings of Reigate stone' — all materials to be quarried in nearby Kent — 'and the roof was slated'³ — always a sign of the wealth of mediaeval builders. This was the greatest friars' church in England, exceeding even the dimensions of the Dominican nave and choir at Norwich, which house today a concert hall and a recreation centre. Clustered columns support vast pointed arches and a ceiling of closely-set carved horizontal beams. This picture, showing an interior denuded of chantry altars, statues, votive paintings and lights and all other later mediaeval accretions, evokes the records which Netherlands artists made of their own despoiled yet austere beautiful shrines⁴.

That the first Augustinian buildings were so often replaced at an early date suggests that they were erected in haste, poorly built, and survived the climate only badly. It also witnesses to the fame which the friars acquired through their preaching, and the numbers of those who thronged

² Royal Commission on Historical Monuments: *Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, IV: The City*, London, 1929, Plate 51. Cf. also Mary D. LOBEL, ed., *The British Atlas of Historic Towns: III: The City of London*, Oxford, 1989, 65, material contributed by C.N.L. Brooke and Gillian Keir.

³ *Inventory* (supra n.2), 32.

⁴ A striking and curious example is in the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings P.46 No.7, 'Interior of a church with figures', by Pieter Jansz Saenredam (1597-1665). Cf. Arthur M. HIND: *Catalogue of Drawings by Dutch and Flemish Artists preserved in the ... British Museum*, London, 1931, 44-46. The church, unidentified, is completely stripped of ornament, and the walls have been whitewashed; yet in the foreground Saenredam shows a lady and a gallant conversing with a Franciscan friar in habit and capuche. One can only suppose that this was in a region first surrendered to iconoclasts, but then, as happened in many parts of the Netherlands, regained by Catholics, so that religious were once again free to wear distinctive attire. The writer is much indebted to Miss Hilary Williams of Prints and Drawings for directing him to this interesting picture. Unfortunately, the photograph of Austin Friars, London (supra, n.2) is of too poor quality to permit reproduction.

to hear them. Different circumstances, however, explain the fortunes and the remains of Austin Friars at Rye. This was a busy harbour town, a considerable focus for the mediaeval tourist industry. It was there that countless pilgrims collected, on their way to Compostella, where such 'indulgences' could be gained as to make it a place of devotion equalled now by Lourdes alone; and in Rye they could be delayed for long enough, waiting for favourable weather. This must account for the fine 'Mermaid Inn' and other ancient hostelries to be seen there. The chain of events can be followed easily: the increasing wealth of English citizens enabled them to go abroad in great numbers, this brought prosperity to the 'Cinque Ports', Dover, Hythe, Rye and the others which the Crown required to maintain sea power to defend the Channel against pirates and invaders, and the friars were drawn to them, because provision had to be made for such travellers' spiritual needs.

Louis Francis Salzmann, in his description of Sussex religious houses⁵, has very little to tell about Rye Austin Friars. He writes: 'Of its origin nothing is known, except that the friars were firmly established ... by the middle of the fourteenth century'⁶. This was because his only sources of knowledge were generally-consulted British archives. The distinguished German-American Augustinian, Francis Roth, was, however, able to draw on the uniquely valuable repository of mediaeval lore, the registers of his Order's priors general, diligently examined by Roth for his history⁷. Rye was in fact founded in 1364⁸. The first house and church were built on the 'town salts', land still retained as playing fields, uncultivated but at that time used to allow seawater to flood and evaporate, so as to produce salt, an even more essential commodity than nowadays, as it was the only means apart from smoking of keeping meat in a more or less edible state through the winter months. Such a location meant that the convent was virtually unprotected from the sea's incursions and from hostile attack, notably by French freebooters. Therefore it was transferred, c. 1379, to the more sheltered and defensible place on Conduit Hill where its extensive remains are still to be seen. An entry of this year in the generals' register records this move, and refers to the previous friary as 'destroyed'⁹.

⁵ *Sussex Victoria County History* vol. 2, London, 1907.

⁶ *Id.*, 96.

⁷ *The English Austin Friars, 1249 - 1538: Sources*, New York, 1963. Citations give numbered documents, not pages.

⁸ *Id.*, no. 482.

⁹ *Id.*, no. 537.

There exists an undertaking of 1368¹⁰ that the community will offer Masses to which lay persons may be admitted, gratifying no doubt to the friars and to pious pilgrims, but scarcely to the incumbents of St. Mary's, Rye, then as now the parish church. Quarrels and suits over such alms, and the burial of the dead, were a constant feature of mediaeval church life, since the secular clergy resented and fought what they regarded as the mendicants' abusive encroachments upon their own rights and emoluments.

At the time of this undertaking, Richard Bedding was prior, and eleven of his brethren are named; but early in the next century the house, like many other such institutions, was beginning to suffer from a lack of vocations. In 1439 the English provincial agreed to send them four new members, on condition that within four years they found themselves novices¹¹.

When the Dissolution came, Rye was no more spared than were greater monasteries. A semblance of justice was contrived by Crown visitations, for reports to Cromwell on their present state; and in the South-East these were carried out by a suffragan bishop named Ingworth. In December 1538 he informed his master that he would conclude his inspection at Canterbury, and then proceed to Sandwich and Rye. He and the other commissioners followed a procedure which became standard: each house had to be shown as harbouring notorious evil-livers, or to be poor to the point of destitution, to be redundant or to contain inmates who would not subscribe to the Act of Supremacy. The refusal of this cost St. Thomas More, St. John Fisher and St. John Stone their deaths as traitors. Stone, England's one Augustinian martyr, whose name may show that he was a native of the parish similarly named, one of England's oldest, founded by Augustine, the apostle of England, on the Thames's southern shore, belonged to Austin Friars, Canterbury, where Ingworth conducted a fruitless confrontation with him. Then the bishop went on to Rye, where, he stated, the monastic buildings were ruinous. Since only fourteen years earlier a farmer, William Marsh, had entirely reroofed them¹², it is hard to believe that this was true, any more than the further remark that those who remained there were living in dire poverty, since three years before Clement Harworth had made generous bequests to the prior, Nicholas Unkely, and to four of his companions, possibly the entire community, for

¹⁰ *Id.*, no.791.

¹¹ *Id.*, no. 1048, also recorded by Salzmann (*supra*, n.5).

¹² *Id.*, no.1049.

their prayers¹³. Roth wrote that Harworth's will 'proves that the Austins were highly respected and well-loved until the very end'. At any rate, Ingworth did not allege any sexual misconduct there; but none the less, the convent was doomed.

After the London friars had been expelled, their church in the City was ceded to the Huguenot colony, refugees from Catholic persecution, so that they might worship there in peace and in their native tongue, as is still today the situation. For a time, the Rye buildings were likewise used by Dutch Protestants. Before that, Cromwell had placed a value on the property, but, as Ingworth's report had prompted, a very mean one; yet no-one bought it, even though there was then much scrambling after such booty. The later vicissitudes of the premises were many. They were not maintained as a Huguenot Church; and for a time the Netherlanders were succeeded by strolling players, who probably appreciated the hire of what had been the great hall (not the chapel, as Nicolas Pevsner in the generally admirable Penguin Guide to Sussex¹⁴ wrongly stated) as an alternative to their more usual barns. Today this hall is utilized as workshops and show-rooms by Cinque Ports Pottery, and the care of this firm for the fabric and their interest in it are some guarantee for its preservation.

One hundred years ago, Augustinians were sent to Hythe, another Cinque Port, some fifteen miles to the east of Rye. This happened in obedience to the laws of demand and supply. The military installations at Hythe, notably the School of Musketry, had created a community, albeit small, of Catholic families, for whom the War Office did not furnish permanent or even long-term chaplains. The bishop of Southwark of that time was John Butt. As a young priest he had volunteered to serve in the Crimea. This was before Florence Nightingale had set about remedying the insanitary conditions of which Butt almost died. His semi-invalidism thereafter still had allowed him a long and useful life; and as a bishop he was determined that the Hythe Catholics should have daily Mass in their own town. Until then, they had often been obliged to make their way as best they might to Our Lady Help of Christians in Folkestone. One can imagine that Butt's Crimean experiences had endowed him with lively sympathy for an Irish soldiery transplanted to non-Catholic England and concerned, above all, for their children's upbringing. It was he who introduced the Austins, themselves chiefly from Ireland, who at once began preparations to build the present church. In 1891 the superior — Hythe had not yet

¹³ *Id.*, no. 1099.

¹⁴ Ian NAIRN and Nicolas PEVSNER, *The Buildings of England: Sussex*, Harmondsworth, 1965, repr. 1985, 599.

achieved a priory's independence — was a certain Edward Selley, a London convert from the Anglican faith; but he was succeeded by the first prior, Richard O'Gorman, a Wexford man, who had already worked in Hoxton, his Order's pioneering post-Reformation parish in England. Even there, O'Gorman had shown enthusiasm for mediaeval English Augustinian history, and had spent many hours at 'Austin Friars', drawn there by its surviving monumental inscriptions, marking the tombs of London citizens and recording their charitable gifts. O'Gorman's strenuous parochial life at Hythe did not preclude the pursuit of his historian's and archaeologist's interests (he is the author of *Haymo of Hythe*¹⁵, the biography of the son of the Cinque Port who became bishop of Rochester, and who designated his family's home, still standing, to receive and tend the town's poor and indigent). He lost little time before visiting Rye Austin Friars, and immediately he recognized in the 'sollar' or 'solar' window, extending from the ground to the roof, so that it could provide daylight for the high hall, an exact copy of another in the London Austin chapel which he had come to know so well¹⁶. The window in St. Mary's at Rye, erected in the fifteenth century, is quite evidently modelled on that in the local Austin Friars.

Although O'Gorman never published this find, later events have shown it as a happy one, for want of which the character of the Rye windows could now be forgotten, because the London Austin Friars as he had known it no longer exists. During the Second World War it was destroyed by bombing — and though the Dutch community erected a second church on the devastated site, the mediaeval glories are now gone forever. O'Gorman could not know what service he had performed for English Augustinian history — had he foreseen this, he would have rejoiced, for during his years in South-Eastern England he became known to his compatriots as 'more English than the English', not, from them, necessarily a right-handed compliment. Yet we today can be glad that the footsteps which he left upon the sands of time are not obliterated.

Hythe

Edmund COLLEDGE, O.S.A.

¹⁵ London, 1895.

¹⁶ I am obliged to the Revd Heuk van Waveren, now minister of the Dutch Church in London, for information concerning the bombing disaster which destroyed the old Austin Friars. Regrettably, the camera which took the Historical Monuments photograph (supra, n.2) was set to face the east end, so that the window in the south wall which O'Gorman had identified with that at Rye cannot be discerned.