

My special day in Crowland Abbey

by EMMA HOOD

A very special day in my life was when I went to Crowland Abbey. Something happened to me that was not of this world, although at the time it was, to me, perfectly natural and right. It was in 1944. My husband was on leave, his ship being in for repairs, and we were spending time with his parents, happy to be able to relax together.

That day, after a lazy breakfast, we boarded the first bus that came into the little market place, not minding at all where it would take us. The single decker bus made its way out into the fenland. The flatness has always made such a great impact on me, such a contrast coming from hilly Dorset. 'Little Holland' is just the right description, and even in the war years there were beautiful carpets of reds, blues, yellows, the fields of tulips and hyacinths. I remember the feeling of wonder and thankfulness for the peace and quiet beauty all around us, such a contrast to the horrors of war.

I marvelled at the women, backs doubled, picking potatoes, wearing sun bonnets, with a frill at the back to keep the sun from the neck. What hard work, yet these cheerful ladies had homes to clean and families to care for. My very favourite fenland lady was my husband's granny. She lived in a little old cottage by the River Welland. She was well over eighty when I knew her, not very tall, with an hour-glass figure, and her hair thick and curly, was snow white. She always wore a high necked button-type blouse, long black skirt and button-up boots, and was never seen at home without a snow white starched bib apron. She had borne eleven children, and each Sunday all the children and grandchildren who could would come to tea. She would not allow the girls to do work for her, but her home was spotless. The hob was black and shiny, with brass and copper kettles side by side, always singing, and the largest brown tea pot I'd ever seen.

The bus driver chatted to us all the while, delighted to point out to this girl from Dorset all the beauty spots, in fact we were his only passengers that day. He was typical of the fenland people—homely, friendly and willing to be helpful. It was his 'there's the Abbey' that decided us. We got out at Crowland, arranging with our friendly bus driver to return with him later in the day. I fell in love with Crowland. It was like stepping into a giant postcard picture of the village. There was a stillness in my mind, which wrapped itself around me like a fine silk shawl. Standing proud and demanding in the market place is a bridge, one like I had never seen before, or its equal since. It has three arches, giving full meaning to the name Trinity Bridge—one in three, three in one. We were interested in the statue and a very old gentleman who was sitting there was pleased to tell us all about the bridge, and that the statue was Christ holding the world on his hands.

Making our way up to the Abbey, we met the vicar

who said we may go into the Abbey, and also told us to look on the outside at the Norman arch. This we did first, as we sat under the large old trees savouring the warm day, and the solitude. We entered the Abbey and knelt down to pray, then sat back to look round. I felt as if we were intruding on the tall man of the cloth standing to the left of the altar. He wore a habit, which was very old, it seemed threadbare. I noticed that he had a cross and beads that looked as if they were made of wood, interlaced between his long fingers; his head was covered with the cowl and when bowed showed his shaven crown with a ring of sandy coloured hair. I was trying not to stare, but found myself looking at the man again. His face was that of a man who had come through inner conflict and won. Thin, lantern jawed, and an arrogant nose, his lips were moving in silent prayer. The atmosphere was of peace and reverence, I felt it about me.

The Abbey is not so large that we could not be seen or heard by the man, so I whispered to my husband, who was also looking towards him, 'Shall we go? It isn't right to be here, we are intruding on his prayers'. He replied, 'What are you talking about, intruding on who?' 'The monk,' I said. 'You are looking at him. Let us leave, perhaps we should not be here. It is probably private prayer time'.

My husband stared at me, took hold of my hand and we went out. As we reached the doorway he led me back in again and said, 'Is he there now?' I looked, 'Yes, you know he is, you are looking at him again'. We went out into the sunshine, and I fussed. 'What on earth is the matter?' Ron said. 'I saw no one inside the Abbey'. But I knew that I saw a perfectly natural man, of the cloth, as earthly as we were.

My husband went back inside, and as he came out to me, shaking his head, the vicar came up the path towards us. Somehow he gathered all was not right, and my husband told him about it all. 'My goodness me', he said, that is nothing for you to be concerned about. Your wife has had a very unusual experience. Very few have seen him. I have seen him in the grounds more than once, although never in the Abbey. He is deep in his thoughts and prayers as he walks by'.

I began to understand I had been privileged that day to take a moment or two back over the centuries, to be present whilst this holy man was at his prayers.

My husband and I stayed in Dorset after 1947 when he was demobbed. We never visited Crowland again when we returned to Spalding for holidays. Five years ago we moved to Peterborough, and as soon as we could arrange it we spent a day at Crowland. I retraced our steps about the Abbey grounds, but I knew before I entered the Abbey that I would not see the monk again. Over the years I have given this much thought, and I have come to realise that it was because I was not aware of such things that it happened.