

St. Mary Long Sutton 800th Anniversary

ONE of the loveliest of Lincolnshire's churches stands in Long Sutton, about two miles from the county's southern border. The church itself, in the main street, is less than a quarter of a mile west of the A.17 road. In the fourteenth century it was served by monks from Castle Acre Priory.

The two-storey cell in which the monks lived is open to visitors to the Church. Recently I stood in the small seven-sided ground-floor stone room. Under its groined roof, I tried to picture the occupants of many years ago.

From the 'base' at Castle Acre monks came to this 'outpost' for three months' service. I wondered how they were chosen. Was three months at Long Sutton a pleasant change from normal Priory routine, or was it an irksome duty in which all had to take their turn? Maybe it was a reward for work well done, or maybe it was in the nature of a punishment for misdeeds.

The journey is about twenty-five miles. How much longer the miles must have been to the monks than they are to us.

I imagined a monk, around the year 1360, tramping along the marshy tracks. His journey took him close to the route followed some 150 years earlier by King John. He would have heard the gossip that the King had lost many of his treasures in the Wash. Perhaps he lingered along the pathway until low tide and then waded into the waters to search for buried jewels. He knew others had tried and failed, but there was just the possibility he might be lucky.

A POSSIBLE TREASURE TROVE

If by good fortune he found something of value what did he do with it? Did he sell it, or take it back with him when he returned to the Priory? Or did he hide it in Long Sutton Church? Maybe hidden within a few feet of where I was standing were some of the lost jewels. The odds, however, were in favour of his having to continue his walk no richer than before.

Perhaps as he marched along, his thoughts turned to the tragedy of the Black Death that had recently swept across the country. It had been said that about half the population died from this terrible disease. He remembered those of his colleagues who succumbed to it, and offered up a prayer of thanksgiving for his own safety.

Then there were the labour troubles that followed the epidemics. The high death roll had caused an acute shortage of workers. Those still alive realised that they had a scarcity value, and began to demand higher wages.

The government had dealt with this capital versus labour clash by its Statutes of Labourers, issued in 1351. But things would never be quite the same again.

This was, indeed, a time of change. There was the clergyman, John Wycliffe, who was fermenting the discontent of the working classes, questioning the right of the few to own so much. It was rumoured that he was thinking of translating the Bible into English. He had even said that monks were lazy and greedy.

But perhaps the monk's most disturbing thoughts, as he neared his destination, were concerned with the recent news from the battlefield. A new and deadly substance had recently been used in battle—gunpowder. Any army that possessed this 'weapon' could be assured of victory over an enemy who lacked it. What would be its effect? Would war now, by common consent, be outlawed, or would an arms-race result in which each nation stock-piled its gunpowder, while making bigger and better cannons? Would this new and terrifying power in man's hands be used for good, or for evil?

THE MONKS' CELL

Footsore, the monk came at last within sight of the Church of St. Mary. Wearily, he plodded the fifty yards from the village street to the west door. He noticed the square tower and spire built the previous century on the N.W. corner. Passing through the doorway, he walked slowly down the nave.

I tried to picture the inside of the church as he saw it. The massive stone pillars and rounded arches, in Norman style, formed a guard of honour on either side. Above them was a Norman clerestory supporting the roof. The church must have been darker then than now, for in the nineteenth century the roof was raised by adding a second clerestory.

On either side of the nave were modern aisles which had been added only a few years previously. What beautiful architecture they displayed, especially in the north aisle. Walking along the nave, he saw a chancel higher than the present one. A small door in the chancel wall led him into the cell, his home for the next three months.

The cell to me seemed small and cold and cheerless. To the monk, it must have grown smaller as the days and weeks went by. How dark and eerie it would be at night. No street-lamps shone across the pathway to the church. The noise of traffic, so commonplace to-day that we only become conscious of it in its absence, never disturbed the quiet of the countryside. No motorbikes roared along the roads. Only the occasional wild animal or bird broke the silence. Inside, the church was cold, empty, silent. Shadows flickered about the building as the moonbeams played through the windows.

Climbing the winding stone staircase to the upper room, I thought of the monk of six hundred years ago padding up the same stairs. Near the top was a niche in the wall. Perhaps each night, on his way up, he paused to look through it, to gaze for a few moments at the altar below. Did he nightly, standing on this small stairway, say a prayer for himself and for those to whom he ministered? Did he add a plea to God that the tremendous power newly discovered by man should not be used for self-destruction?

by **ALLAN CAMPBELL**

This article on St. Mary's Church, Long Sutton, by Allan Campbell was first published in *Lincolnshire Life* in February, 1970. We reprint it to commemorate the National Appeal to preserve this lovely Lincolnshire Church and its unique spire.

