

**A ROYAL CHRISTMAS IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY.**

Being an Account of How King Henry VI. Spent the Christmas-Tide of A. D. 1433-4 with the Monks of Edmundsbury.

[The following narrative, even in minute details, is taken from the contemporary account of the King's visit and the records of the Abbey, and is condensed by us from the London Tablet, of 26th December, 1891.]

**LYDGATE'S DEDICATION TO KING HENRY.**  
Sovereign lord please to your goodly head  
And to your gracious royal magnificence  
To make this treatys, which alwen hope and  
dred  
Presentyd ys to your byh excellence  
And for Kyng Edmunds notable reverence  
Both to bye on yre dyffence and champton  
Because yt ys off your souaacion.

**INTRODUCTION.**

The Christmas of 1433 Henry VI. spent at Edmundsbury. Although events were taking place which already threatened the overthrow of English rule in France, as yet the heritage left to his infant son by Henry V. was intact, and the English people greeted their young sovereign with every confidence as the monarch of the two great realms of England and of France. A child of but twelve years, he had, at the time of which we speak, been recently crowned in Paris, whither he had proceeded amidst every sign, fallacious though it might have been, of popular rejoicing; "attended by the chief of the English nobility and 3,000 horse, he left Pontoise and was received by the clergy, the Parliament, the magistrates, and the citizens of the capital. Triumphal arches had been erected, mysteries were performed and devices were exhibited to honor and entertain the young King." The ceremony of coronation "was performed by an English prelate, the Cardinal of Winchester, and the high offices of State were filled by Englishmen, or by natives of inferior rank." Herein lay the weakness which time was to disclose; but as yet the Maid of Orleans had not appeared on the scene, and there was no indication that the fugitive Charles VII. would ever enter into the full possession of the kingdom which had been ruled by his fathers. On Henry's return to England, therefore, the people of this country could welcome their twice crowned sovereign with unrestrained exultation and joy—feelings heightened by the ingenuous and noble character of the child, and by the bright hopes of the future to which the thought that he was the son of a hero gave birth.

**THE PREPARATION FOR THE VISIT TO BURY.**

On All Saints' Day, in 1433, presiding at the meeting of Parliament at Westminster, the King publicly announced that, in accordance with the custom of his royal house, he, by the advice of his Council, intended to spend the season—Christmas to St. George's Day—at the Abbey of Bury, St. Edmund's. The unwonted news reached Abbot Curtseys whilst he was staying at his manor of Elmwell, some six miles distant from the Abbey. At first he seems hardly able to understand this novel proposal. At St. Albans on the high road to the north, the monks had been accustomed for two or three centuries to frequent visits of King and Court, but, said the Abbot, when the message was brought him, nowhere in the chronicles can we find that the King of England, at least for such a time, ever fixed his stay with us, by the expression of his Royal will.

The burden, be it understood, was no light one. A King, a Court, and all the numerous attendants, from the Lords and Knights to the lowest valet—to house and board all these in a fitting manner would put the resources of even such a house as Edmundsbury to the test. However, the Abbot quickly determined to do his best to maintain the honor of St. Edmund's Church and Monastery, and a few days later found him returned to Bury in order himself to superintend the needful preparations. His house, or "Palace," as the record calls it, was in an indifferent state of repair, and eighty workmen were at once engaged, not merely to set it all in order, but to decorate and beautify it, as so loyal a subject as Abbot Curtseys would best wish to do.

**THE RECEPTION.**

At length all was ready for the day of the King's arrival. The monks among themselves had for three days past

sounded the note of the coming feast of Christmas by the antiphon *Orietur sicut sol*. For at St. Edmundsbury, at least, it was the custom to watch for the coming festival from the third day before Christmas, and the 23rd December stood in their calendar as the Vigil of the Vigil of Our Lord's Birthday, from the first Vespers of which day, out of reverence for the coming feast, the whole divine services were performed with special solemnity.

Christmas-Eve was the day fixed for the royal arrival. At daybreak the town was all astir, and the Alderman and Burgesses and other townfolk, five hundred in number, in their scarlet robes and red cloth gowns with blood-colour hoods, set out on horseback, in open ranks stretching a mile along the road, to meet the King at the Newmarket Heath and bring him into Bury. Henry was accompanied by a stately train, and with this brilliant addition to his retinue, he rode on to the monastic enclosure.

The bell tower over the great gateway was then in ruins, and so to avoid all possible danger, Henry and his gay cavalcade entered the precincts by a safer if a lesser entrance. But this can in no way have detracted from the splendour of his reception. The Burgesses, who, on the part of Bury, had taken so prominent a part of the proceedings, had only come to introduce the King to the reception prepared for him.

It is no difficult task for the imagination to picture the vast court of Bury Abbey, crowded with the inhabitants of the town and the villages of the franchise of St. Edmund, eager to catch a glimpse of their Sovereign. Meantime, the hosts themselves had done their parts to arrange a ceremonial of reception worthy of a King. As rumour heralded his near approach, the great western doors of the Abbey Church—works of beaten bronze, cunningly chiselled by the skilful hands of Master Hugh and possibly by what Abbot Anselm, the nephew of the sainted Archbishop, had himself seen at Monte Cassino—were thrown open. Forth issued the community, some sixty or seventy in number, all vested in precious copes, headed by cross and candles, and preceding their Abbot in full pontificals, with whom walked, an honoured guest, Bishop Alnwick of Norwich, whom on this occasion they associated with themselves in the part of host. The ranks of the vested monks opened on either side, and through them the Bishop and Abbot advanced to greet their Boy-king. Then, the Earl of Warwick, quickly alighting from his horse, ran forward, and, receiving the King in his arms assisted him to dismount. Henry now advanced towards the procession, and kneeling on the silken cloth spread out on the ground, was sprinkled with holy water by the Abbot, who also presented the crucifix for adoration, which was reverently kissed by the King.

The procession here turned to re-enter the stately church, and was followed by the whole crowd. The building was enough to accommodate even such a multitude as was then assembled. The western front from end to end stretched for nearly 250 feet, and within an unbroken length of over 500 feet met the eye. The massive Norman architecture was relieved by the painted vaulting—that of the choir by the monk "Dom John Wodecroft, the King's painter," in the days of Abbot John I. de Norwich (1279-1301) that of the nave to match—executed in the taste of the 14th century at the expense of the sacrist, John Lavenham (circa A. D. 1370), who during his term of office had spent something like £50,000 of our money on beautifying the church. The new lantern tower above the choir was his work, as well as the clerestory windows round the sanctuary; and the painted glass in the southern side of the Minster had been the gift of King Edward III to St. Edmund.

The procession finished, and Henry having prayed before the Blessed Sacrament, he passed out of the sight of his people by one of the side doors in the altar-screen, which had been adorned with paintings by the care of Prior Edmund Brundish, into the feretory beyond to pay his devotions at the shrine of the saint. This priceless work of art rested on a base of gothic stonework, and was itself covered with plates of solid gold enriched with every kind of jewel. The monks loved to recall how King John had every year of his reign bestowed ten marks on the work of beautifying the shrine, and how among the stones which sparkled on it a great and precious sap-

phire and a ruby of great price had been his special gifts. On the right side, too, was the golden cross set with many jewels surmounting a flaming carbuncle, the rich gifts of Henry Lacy, the last Earl of Lincoln of that name, whilst a second golden cross weighing 66 shillings, from the same generous benefactor, formed the apex of the shrine.

Having ended his devotions, King Henry turned to the Abbot and thanked him for the reception given him, and then, accompanied by the members of his suite, he passed into the Abbot's palace, where all expressed their pleasure at the preparations which had been made for them.

**THE BEGINNING OF THE FEAST.**

Christmas Day was rung in by four successive changes; first came the tones of the two Londons—the greater and the Holy-water bell, the second and the third peals were sounded on the bells in the cemetery, and amongst them Gabriel, the bell rung in thunder storms, and its companion, Galieona. The beginning of the third peal was the signal for the cantors and all the rest of the vested ministers to enter the choir for Vespers, wherupon the younger monks began ringing the bells in the great lantern tower, and then all the bells of the Monastery took up the music, and above them all was heard the well known tongue of *Haut et cler*; and thus, all sounding together, there rang out what the townspeople knew as *le glas*, which was the signal for the beginning of the office.

With the first peal the monks prepared for Vespers. Coming from the dormitory they repaired to the lavatory and washed their hands. Then those who were not to be vested in copes put on albs which lay ready set out for them in the choir, whilst the Abbot, Prior, and others prepared for the functions in the vestry. The Abbot, and today, of course, the Bishop of Norwich, would be in full pontificals. Meantime the torches and candles were being lighted throughout the church. Besides the four great wax candles mentioned as ever kept burning at the four corners of the Shrine of St. Edmund, twenty-four each, of a pound weight, were lighted on the walls surrounding the feretory, and seventeen more of the same weight were placed in the seventeen windows round the presbytery. In the choir, the great candle, five large torches standing before the high altar, each weighing four pounds, and seven of the same size in the great gilded seven-branched candlestick, were lighted. These last were reflected in the plates of gold which adorned this great candelabrum, and, together with one torch before the high altar, were kept burning until the close of the second Vespers of the feast. Then twelve more great torches were ablaze in the choir and rood, and a second dozen in the lantern tower, whilst twenty-six in either transept! one before each of the twenty-four altars of the church, one great candle set; under each arch of the nave, and twelve more huge waxen torches, each of eight pounds, before the altar of the Blessed Virgin in the chapel—a church itself in size—on the north side of the choir, completed the illumination of the vast church.

**THE MATINS AND MASSES OF THE FEAST.**

Between nine and ten o'clock the bells rang out once more for Matins and the midnight Mass. The manner of life in the 15th century was more hardy than ours, and, what is more, religion was interwoven with all the thoughts and habits of the English people. There is little doubt, therefore, that the building was once more filled with an expectant multitude. The proportions of the spacious church would have been magnified to the imagination by the solemn shadows of the Christmas night. The altar and feretory was a perfect blaze of light, which only threw the nave into deeper darkness. For it is evident that in the disposition of the lights there was a settled purpose. Whilst the vast nave was left in comparative shade, the great crossing was brilliantly lit up, and from the lantern a strong light was cast down upon the Rood with the attendant figures of Our Lady and St. John, an incomparable production of the same Master, Hugh, who had made the great brazen doors of the church. The intermediate choir was again moderately lighted up, contrasting with the brilliant illumination of the altar and the place of the shrine beyond.

The long Matins were yet more magnificent in their ceremonial than had

been the Vespers. The closing Responsory of each succeeding nocturn was sung by an increasing number of coped cantors standing around the great antiphonal of Prior Brundish, whilst the *O magnum mysterium*, though sung by only two, had a thrilling effect. For these two were the picked voices of the community, chosen because their clear and resonant tones would make the vaulting ring, and would penetrate to every corner of the vast basilica.

The close of each nocturn was marked by the same elaborate ceremonial of censuring as at Vespers, and by the time the *Te Deum* was reached the whole church was filled with fragrant incense. During the singing of the hymn of praise the Abbot and his numerous ministers went to vest for Mass, and at the close of Matins the Holy Sacrifice began with the *Introito*, the *Confiteor*, and so on, as usual.

The Introit was sung by the Presentor, the Succentor, and four companions in copes, and, according to the practice at Edmundsbury, into the *Kyrie* was inserted the *O Rex clemens*, one of the two *farsuræ* allowed by the old use of the house. *Gloria in excelsis*, as was then the custom on all principal feasts, was sung by the whole convent in a body, and glorious indeed was the chant of such a number of trained voices, re-echoed by the vaulting of that mighty roof.

The Prophecy was sung by two with well-according voices, and the Mass was followed by Lauds, and only after this the community retired, if not to sleep, at least to rest, awaiting the big bell of the great tower, which it is the duty of the Sacrist's servants to ring on this morning at the first streak of dawn, at which sound all went once more into the church to the Aurora Mass.

The third Mass was preceded by Procession, for which, whilst Tierce was being sung, preparations were made. First walked the servers, carrying the Holy Water and two thuribles; next, two cross-bearers in copes with two torch-bearers on either sides; then the shrine with the *Camisia* of St. Edmund, borne by two secular chaplains in albs and copes; then three subdeacons followed, of whom the middle one—the epistolar of the Mass—reverently bore the great Gospel Book, the sumptuous gift of Abbot Samson, and the other two other texts of lesser price. Then walked three deacons carrying relics, the middle one—the Gospeller—having the reliquary with *Ave* on the top. Last, in the first part of the great procession, walked a priest, a grave and ancient senior, carrying the arm of St. Edmund, and after him, two and two, in open ranks, followed the whole convent, whilst in their midst walked the Procentor and the Succentor ruling the chant, the former with the seniors, the latter with the juniors. On this day the procession was closed, after the two prelates in full pontificals, by the King clad in regal dress, followed by his court and doubtless by some, if not all, of the scarlet clothed burgesses of the town of Bury.

In this wise they passed along the cloister, by the marble effigy of Anselm, the first mitred Abbot of the house, whose memory after three centuries was still fresh, and so by three sides of the cloister to the crypt, the entrance of which was from the Eastern alley. This crypt, over a hundred feet long by as many broad, supported on twenty-four columns, and dedicated like that at Canterbury to the Blessed Virgin, extended under that part of the eastern limb of the church occupied by the shrine of St. Edmund. The procession entered it singing the responsory *Descendit*; the relics were placed on the altar, the ministers ranging themselves within the altar rails. When all had entered and had taken their places, the Prior and Sub-Prior censed the altar and the dignitaries, and the thurifers the community. After a prose sung by six voices, and the prayer of the Station, the procession returned through the cloister to the church, and there, singing the *Sancta et Immaculata* they entered the nave. A supreme moment this for the Bury people. Our imagination can well picture the eagerness with which they crowded round to look at the splendid pageant and to get a glimpse of their youthful Monarch, and the delay, necessitated by a second *statio* before the great cross in the rood loft, gave them time to satisfy their curiosity.

Here the Abbot intoned the anthem *Hodie Christus*, singing which the procession passed into the choir, where, today, as on all greater feasts, the relics