

Loose Canons – runaways, renegades and reconciliation in Austin priories

‘History’ and ‘story’ come from the same word, *historia*, and I’m going to tell you the stories of various religious women and men – interesting and entertaining stories, but hopefully ones from which we can draw what *we’d* call historical conclusions.

Our stories are about the canons and canonesses of four Augustinian, or Austin, priories – two in neighbouring villages in Yorkshire, and two in Surrey. Of these, Merton Priory was by far the biggest and most important. It had around 30 canons, several lay-brethren, and lots of servants, providing an almost endless supply of hospitality to visitors, including the king, who stopped by from time to time. The other three priories were smaller, and show the huge variety in size and function that is the hallmark of the Augustinians. A neighbour of Merton, about 15 miles down the road, was Tandridge Priory. Originally established as a hospital, Tandridge probably used Merton’s observances, and perhaps its habit, but there the similarity ended: its canons were, probably, never more than five in number.¹ Our two Yorkshire priories were originally one, the double house of Marton, founded in the 1150s. By 1167, the canonesses had withdrawn themselves to the neighbouring hamlet of Moxby, a couple of fields away. The reason is unknown. The canonesses numbered eight or nine in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and we can presume that this was a constant number from 1167. The canons of Marton were no more than twice that number: in 1322, there were ten canons; at the Dissolution, there were sixteen (and 37 servants). Tandridge and Moxby were small houses; Marton medium-sized; Merton, large.² I’ve called the paper ‘loose canons’ chiefly because I love a pun, but also because our misdoers were culpable of different types of laxity: some were flagrant fornicators; some incompetent or unsuitable; others just ran away.

There are surprisingly few tales of misdeeds of the canons of Merton. If we were to take a declinist approach to mediaeval monasticism, in which the dissolution of the monasteries was inevitable, as they had lost their way and were limping on unhealthily, we might expect lots of loose behaviour from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Sure enough, at Merton in 1510, Prior William Salyng was castigated by the bishop of Winchester for spending too much time studying at Oxford, to the neglect of his duties as prior, and he was grounded. The bishop also forbade him from seeing any woman except by way of duty, and to cease in the company of a certain canon of Bishopsgate Hospital and a couple of other men, and contenting himself with the company of a new chaplain every quarter instead. Salyng was also to show the priory accounts and inventory. The bishop had no complaint about the behaviour of any other canon; indeed, he exhorted Salyng to take the counsel of the older and wiser canons for emending his own behaviour.³ On the face of the case of William Salyng, we might see the decline of a monastery, but looking in more depth, we actually see its health and vigour. The bishop’s only complaint about the canons was that there were not enough of them, and the prior’s absence at university is hardly the worst sin imaginable. Even going further back into Merton’s history, we do not see too many more instances of wrong-doing.

1 Heales, Tandridge, p.3.

2 VCH, p.?

3 Heales, Merton, pp.318-21, c-cii.

The spring and summer of 1258 was rather a busy one for Merton. In March, it entertained Walter Bronescombe on his way down to Exeter to take up his bishopric; in June, it accommodated a whole host of bishops, who met there to discuss how they would deal with Henry III's parliament at Oxford. Only a few days before the bishops arrived, one William de Cantia, or William Kent, former canon of Merton, broke into the house, 'intending with great temerity to re-order the place and effects'. The bishop of Winchester's official had to step in and remove William, and to try to find him a place at another Austin priory, in order to avoid the scandal of vagabondage.⁴ These events suggest that William, having left or been ejected from Merton sometime earlier, had not been successfully implanted in another house previously, but had been wandering abroad.

In the 1340s, Merton had to deal with another errant canon. In 1347, the bishop wrote to the prior about the absolution from excommunication of John Panell. Paynell had lain violent hands on one of Merton's clerks, John le Barbour. What the cause of the fight was, we are not told, but this was not Paynell's first misdemeanour: he had run away from Merton in the previous decade and spent some time as a vagabond.⁵ Various Paynells appear as Merton canons throughout the later Middle Ages, and we can assume a family connexion with the Priory. Paynell comes from one of the Pagnells – Newport Pagnell (Buckinghamshire), or – probably – Boothby Pagnell (Lincolnshire). Merton held lands and livings not too far from either. Later Paynells were committed to their Augustinian vocation – in the late fifteenth century, Andrew was third prior, and going into the sixteenth century, Thomas was a great translator of Erasmus. John Paynell was ordained acolyte and subdeacon in 1316 and deacon the following year;⁶ by 1334, he had been at Merton for nearly 20 years, and was now a man in his late thirties.

Whereas John Paynell ran away from Merton in the 1330s, William le Ferour seems to have run away *to* Merton. In 1331, Juliana Vyn of York went to the bishop of Winchester to fetch her husband back. The bishop found William indeed to be her lawful husband and therefore his vows to be null and void. One can't help feeling that Juliana should have left the inadequate William there. Some time around then, another William Kent was involved, with the prior, in breaking into the chests of Merton villagers and destroying their muniments. The dismayed villagers took their suit to the king.⁷ This act of rapacity and violence is not recorded in Merton's cartulary. It may be connected to another violent episode, from 1331, when one William, bailiff of Merton, 'violently snatched the roll of the register in which crimes and excesses of this kind were entered' from the bishop's official in Cuddington church. The archdeacon promptly excommunicated William, but found himself and his clerks shut in Kingston church and surrounded by William's heavies, or, as they were described, 'some sons of damnation of Kingston'.⁸

The bishop of Winchester sent John of Wolvey to Merton in 1350 to investigate abuses and to correct them with haste, lest 'grave scandal' occur – but we don't know what the abuses were or what the scandal would have been.⁹ We know more about the scandals of the 1370s and 80s. Four canons left the Priory in 1376 – Robert Chamberlayne, Clement Tolworth, John Warde and Thomas Scott, and were returned by the bishop.¹⁰ At the same time, Merton fell out with its vicar of Kingston over

4 Heales, p.133; Cart. no.cxxxvi.

5 Heales, p.248; nos.CXV, CXVI; Edington i, p.18.

6 Sandale, pp.166, 176, 178, 232, 248, 348.

7 VCH Surrey.

8 Registers of Stratford i p.205, no.611

9 Edington i, p.31, no.228.

10 Logan, p.224; C81/1789/35.

endowments and dues. Four years previously, in 1372, the bishop had admonished Merton for the dilapidation of three parish chapels. The bishop's visitation of 1387 criticised Merton canons for not keeping observances properly, for keeping hunting hounds, and for allowing persons into the cloister who shouldn't have been there. The following year, another admonition was issued for the disrepair of one of its churches. It would appear that Merton was experiencing financial difficulties, and perhaps this was causing a period of general decline. However, the Prior, Robert Windsor, was used as an official by Bishop William Wykeham on several occasions, and in 1387 Merton Priory was asked to house John Chertsey, expelled from Newark Priory for his crimes and excesses. It is doubtful that a bishop would have sent a troublesome canon into a troubled house. There is evidence of Merton's continuing spirituality, too: in 1382 the bishop licensed William, bishop of Nantes, to dedicate three altars and two altar tops in the Priory church. Finally, the bishop seems to have sent the 1387 visitation injunctions to other monasteries as well as Merton, suggesting that they were more general and less particular. Merton's copy, indeed, has a note of protest attached to it: perhaps the canons weren't as bad as they at first glance seem.¹¹

If the bishop of Winchester's injunctions about Merton were a little vague and generic, the archbishop of York's about Marton were not. Trouble at Marton started in the 1280s: Prior Walter resigned owing to age and infirmity and Archbishop Wickwane appointed as prior a canon of Newburgh to turn the priory round, financially and spiritually. In addition, he removed two canons and temporarily put them in other houses. One of these canons, Leonard,¹² was a repeat offender: two years later, the archbishop wrote to the priors of Newburgh and Nostell to find some safe place of confinement for Leonard, as his brethren couldn't tolerate his 'reprobam et perversam conversacione', and the prior of Marton's attempt to lock him up had failed when Leonard broke the iron locks.¹³

In 1307, Archbishop Greenfield sent another brother Leonard to Gisburn (Guisborough), with a weekly board, and asked the prior and convent to treat him kindly, but not to let him wander.¹⁴ In 1308, he sent William Bulmer to the priory of Drax with four marks' annual board, and enjoined the canons of Drax to oversee William's penance, which was of seven years' duration. His brother canon, Richard Garton, was given the same penance, but was not sent away. William Bulmer had been the priory's choice as prior in 1287, but the archbishop had quashed the election. What William had done in 1308 is not stated, but it must have been pretty bad: he would have been fairly elderly at the time – seven year's penance could have been a life sentence. Richard's offence is similarly not noted, but it was surely related.

In 1308/9 Robert of Tickhill was involved in an altercation with the bishop's receiver, William of Yafforth; however, this doesn't seem to have been very serious, and Robert's penance was quickly absolved.¹⁵ (Another canon, Alan of Morton, was the victim of an assault by Sir Ranulph Neville, who was excommunicated for it.¹⁶) More serious were the moral misdemeanours six years later of two canons and one *conversus*. Archbishop Greenfield's visitation of 1314 uncovered what might be

11 Wykeham i, pp.97, 165; Wykeham ii pp.178-9, 285-9, 346, 411; Heales, p.273.

12 Not Laurence, as it says in the VCH.

13 W. Brown (ed.), *The register of William Wickwane: Lord Archbishop of York, 1279-1285* (1907), p.153. The General Chapter of 1288 required each priory to have a strong room for locking up such canons: Knudsen, p.183; Salter, General Chapters, p.44.

14 W. Brown and A. H. Thompson, *The register of William Greenfield, lord archbishop of York, 1306-1315*, vol.ii (Surtees Society CXLIX, 1931), no.740

15 Greenfield, no.1222.

16 Greenfield, no.1317.

described as a hotbed of sex. Alan of Sherburn was guilty of incontinence with a local woman, the daughter of the local cartwright and the wife of a York mason. His brother canon Stephen of Langetoft was carrying on with two women.¹⁷ Roger of Scamston, meanwhile, put the ‘lay’ into ‘lay brother’: he had three local and presumably unmarried women, one married one, and one widow – whether in succession or simultaneously is not recorded. A decade later, the prior of Marton, Simon de Branby, resigned – apparently in connexion to a forthcoming episcopal visitation. In his stead, the canons elected... Alan of Sherburn. Needless to say, the archbishop quashed the election, and appointed a canon of Bridlington as prior.

One canon of Marton ran away – this was Richard of Sherburn, possibly a relation of Alan’s, whom Archbishop Thomas Corbridge sent back in 1303.¹⁸ All of the canons fled their priory temporarily in the early 1320s when the Scots raided the area: in 1322, the canons of Marton and the nuns of Moxby were sent to other priories, as the Scottish raid had destroyed their own.¹⁹ They were apparently back fairly soon, however. At Moxby, Joan de Barton had replaced Alice de Barton as prioress. But in 1325, she herself resigned, owing to a relationship with the chaplain, Laurence de Systeford, that was more than spiritual. Her penance included solitary confinement, fasting, prayers, and not wearing the black veil.²⁰ She seems, however, to have been reinstated as prioress shortly after Archbishop Melton’s visitation of that year. In 1328, Joan Brotherton was done for incontinence yet again – her fourth conviction – and Joan Blaunkefront had transgressed in some way, for she was serving penance which was then relaxed. Twenty years after serving her penance, Joan Blaunkefront quitted the monastery, but was brought back, apparently ‘desiring to be reconciled to her order.’²¹

By far the most troublesome nun was Sabina of Applegarth. In or before 1312, Sabina had quitted Moxby and her habit, and was wandering abroad living in wanton lasciviousness. In April 1312, Archbishop Greenfield’s vicar-general returned her to Moxby, exhorting the prioress and convent to receive her back and oversee her penance, as a shepherd brings back a sheep to the fold or a physician brings medicine to the sick.²² In 1328, she was in trouble again: for ‘certain reasons’, Archbishop Melton ordered her removal from office and her confinement to the monastery – and forbade her to send or receive letters.²³ The office from which she was removed was the top one: she was prioress.

Back down south, troubles for Tandridge began under Prior Walter, who in 1306 was elected, had his election quashed by the bishop, and then was appointed by the bishop. In the middle of the night a year later, his precentor and sacristan, Thomas of Waltham, mistook Walter for an intruder and beat him up, for which Thomas did penance of short duration. In July 1308, the bishop returned Henry Pecham to the monastery, shocked at reports of Henry’s wandering abroad howsoever he pleased, and impressed upon the prior the need to keep Henry bounded. The bishop sent visitors to

17 Greenfield, no.1329 and fn.1

18 Logan, p.218; Reg. Corbridge, p.99, no.252.

19 *VCH York*, vol.3, ed. William Page (London, 1974), pp.223-226, 239-40. The prior, sub-prior and cellarer of Marton stayed to supervise the rebuilding of the priory. Sabina de Apelgarth and Margaret de Neusom were sent to Nun Monkton; Prioress Alice de Barton to Swine; Joan de Barton and Joan de Toucotes to Nun Appleton; Agnes de Ampleford and Agnes de Jarkesmill to Nunkeeling; Joan de Brotherton and Joan Blaunkefront to Hampole. For the plight of the canons of Bolton, see K. Legg, ‘An Edition of the Coucher Book and Charters of Bolton Priory (Yorkshire)’ (unpublished PhD, Sheffield, 2002), pp.134, 139. For a full discussion of reasons for running away, see M. Svec Goetschi, *Klosterflucht und Bittgang: Apostasie und monastische Mobilität im 15. Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 2015), pp.147-206.

20 Melton, fol. 244

21 CPL, iii, pp.188, 210.

22 Greenfield, p.68, no.1286.

23 VCH, p.?²; Melton fol. 248b.

Tandridge later that year, and they found massive financial irregularities. They asked to see the accounts and were told that there were none, and never had been. The visitors called in an auditor, William of Shere, a canon at another house, and he started to collect and collate all the finances. He seems, however, to have been impeded by the cellarer, and in the following February, the bishop removed the cellarer, replacing him with William of Shere, and appointing another canon of Tandridge, John de Gotham, as Shere's deputy. The deposed cellarer was none other than Henry Pecham. The bishop sent Henry to nearby Newark Priory, and instructed the prior to keep Henry in solitary confinement, and to limit carefully whom Henry could talk to – making sure, however, that Henry was exposed to the wisdom of older canons of integrity and experience.²⁴ After two months (in May 1309), Henry's penance was relaxed (he could join in with the Newark community), and after another two months he was sent back to Tandridge – but he was banned from holding office there.²⁵ At this time, Prior Walter resigned, and Thomas of St Albans, a canon of Newark, was appointed in his place. However, Thomas seems to have turned native: after 12 years, the bishop (by then Rigaud de Assier) commanded an inquiry into his management, or mismanagement, of Tandridge, and consequently forced his resignation. Whereupon Henry Pecham was elected prior, but he died after only a year – a trouble-free year – in post. The next prior lost control of the finances, and resigned through incapacity in 1335, to be replaced by another canon of Newark, Philip of Wokingham, who was seen to be a safe pair of hands. But he deserted the priory and was deposed for absence in 1341. Thereafter, Tandridge Priory settled down somewhat, and life seems to have been far less eventful in the following century.

So, what to make of all of these stories? One thing is that occurrences of misdemeanours are fairly rare in the history of a monastery, although there were undoubtedly more instances than those recorded. Donald Logan, in his book on *Runaway Religious*, estimated that for all the apostates (runaway religious) who were recorded, there were between 3 and 7 (that is, up to 7.3%) who were not. We could add a similar estimation for other monastic misdemeanours. If we doubled Logan's figures, we would have, at the upper end, miscreants at around 15% of religious at any one time nationally. However, as discussed by Knowles and Hadcock and subsequently by Donald Logan, one of the main problems in estimating the number of unruly regulars is that it is hard to estimate the number of regulars. We do not know what proportion of nuns, monks and canons were breaking their vows, as we do not know how many took their vows in the first place. Records are incomplete for both the numbers of religious and the numbers of miscreants.²⁶ Merton Priory is a case in point. Logan compiled a list of runaway religious, which seems to be based largely on the Chancery warrants for the arrest of renegade religious, now in the National Archives.²⁷ He found five runaways – the four from the 1370s we met earlier, and one more from the 1520s. But he makes no mention of the other two runaways that we came across – William Kent and John Paynell – and, in fact, another two (Walter Somerton and William West, 1420) despite their being in bishops' registers and the Calendar of Patent Rolls.²⁸ Modern commentaries have to rely on inconsistent evidence, and we modern commentators can ourselves be inconsistent and miss things. As for the total number of Merton canons at any one time, this is unknown. Several historians of Merton, myself included, are compiling a list of Merton canons, but

24 Woodlock i, pp.127-8, 210, 285, 316, 321, 336, 345-6.

25 Heales, Tandridge, pp.23-4; Woodlock i, pp.377-8.

26 Logan, RR, chapter 3.

27 TNA, C 81/1789.

28 CPR 1416-22, p.321.

it's an ongoing and incomplete project. But it does seem that Merton had around 20 to 30 canons at any one time. Therefore, at below 5%, one miscreant would be statistically insignificant for the house, but four at once (around 15 to 20%) would suggest that something was more generally amiss, and perhaps requires further investigation.

Another problem with records, quite apart from their survival, is that they vary in detail according to the individuals who took them. Different bishops had different concerns or priorities, and some were more active in visiting their monastic houses than others – these are things that Janet Burton has pointed out in regard to the fifteenth-century York registers. John Tillotson noted the extraordinary proliferation of visitations, particularly of female convents, by the archbishops of York in the early fourteenth century, probably as a result of the papal decretal *Periculosus* (1298). I'll talk more about this in a while. These visitations unearthed a sizeable number of lapses – 30 errant nuns, convicted either of sexual misconduct or of apostasy. Tillotson says that they were from 9 different houses (sexual misdemeanours) and 8 different houses (apostasy), which gives 17 houses in total, but it was actually 13 houses, as some had more than one sinful nun.²⁹ Moxby was the only Augustinian house to sin – but that's because it was the only Augustinian house. The bishops of Winchester from the same period found little amiss in their nunneries, although the archbishop of Canterbury wrote to Bishop Woodlock, concerned that the Cistercian nuns of Wintney were wandering abroad because they were on their beam-ends and needed more than the house itself could provide.³⁰ Either the nuns of the diocese of Winchester were as pure as the driven snow, or the bishops of Winchester were less concerned than their northern brethren about conforming to *Periculosus*.³¹

With the caveat that our data could be more numerous and more consistent, nonetheless some patterns emerge. Donald Logan found the peak of runaways to be in the mid-fourteenth century, which might be explained first by the high number of religious in the second quarter of the century (the more religious there were, the more runaways) and secondly by the terrible effect of the Black Death.³² The biggest batch of misdemeanours in our Yorkshire houses coincided with the unsettled conditions of Anglo-Scottish relations, and it would be interesting to look at more monasteries in the northern dioceses with this in mind. Christian Knudsen, in his PhD. on 'Naughty Nuns and Promiscuous Monks', found that sexual misconduct was at a fairly constant low level throughout the later Middle Ages, with no rise towards 1530 – that is, no decline in monastic standards during the period which is all too often described as 'Pre-Reformation'. Indeed, Knudsen suggested the possibility that 'sexual misconduct levels dropped in the last half century before the Dissolution. [*sic*] If this is true, then it would indeed be an ironic twist considering the charges made against the monasteries by early modern supporters of the Dissolution'.³³ (I don't like his use of 'early modern' there.) Looking at nuns not for misconduct but for financial management, Des Atkinson found that one Devon Austin convent's finances stayed in much the same condition throughout its existence. The canonesses were not rich, but neither were they poor, and they were never reduced, unlike the nuns of Wintney, to leaving the cloister to beg for alms. Both his and Knudsen's researches call into question the declinist narrative that convents, and perhaps especially female convents, were frailly tottering by the fifteenth

29 John Tillotson, 'Visitation and Reform of the Yorkshire Nunneries in the Fourteenth Century', *Northern History*, 30 (1994), pp.8-9.

30 Woodlock i, pp.672-3; VCH Hants ii, pp.149-51.

31 In 1370, Isabel Gervase, a nun of St Mary's Winchester, was abducted by a 'great number of men'. She was returned, pregnant – whether or no by her own volition is unknown. Logan, p.89.

32 Logan, pp.71-2.

33 Knudsen, p.129.

century and ready only to fall into the arms of the monastic dissolvers of the sixteenth.³⁴ Logan's research supports this – the rates of Augustinian apostasy in the sixteenth century were the same as those of the thirteenth.

Another generalisation that we can make is that order made no difference. Logan found more Augustinian runaways than any other order, but that is because there were more Augustinians full stop. Knudsen found only very slightly more immorality amongst the Augustinians than the Benedictines. He suggested that Austin canons had more chance to sin as they were priests, but this is based on a false assumption: not all canons were priests – indeed, most were not; and certainly the philandering lay brother of Marton would not have been. The difference in numbers, in any case, is statistically insignificant. We should note that Cistercian monks were exempt from episcopal visitations and are therefore less recorded.³⁵ We have no real data from the twelfth century, but we might imagine rates of miscreancy to be low amongst the new orders at least, simply because they were *new* orders – their novelty would have attracted idealists: the Merton canons were described by John of Salisbury as shining 'the light of their good works'.³⁶ By the thirteenth century, however, the pioneering generations of founder-canons now belonged to time out of mind: they were dead and all the canons who might have known them were also dead. Although there were a few new foundations during this period, the Augustinians, like older orders, were now part of the establishment, and possibly attracted people of more ordinary calling, culpable of more human frailty than the rigid ascetes of the twelfth century, although this is complete speculation, and would depend perhaps more on a particular house perhaps than an order.

Three of our houses were male, and one female. One obvious area to study further would be 'gender differences': whether canonesses were treated any differently to canons. The papal decretal *Periculoso* suggests that the sexes *were* treated differently. *Periculoso* sought to keep nuns within their convent – not to let them outside the walls at all. This was in order to protect them, not just from men, but from themselves. Pope Boniface was apparently of the opinion that nuns could not regulate themselves, and that any nun abroad must necessarily have 'slackened the reins of decency and having shamelessly cast aside the modesty of their order and of their sex' and given in to any 'opportunity for wantonness'.³⁷ That meant that the nuns of Wintney should not have been able to wander outside their convent to seek the funding necessary to be able to stay inside it. But that clearly was not the case. The nuns on whom this papal decretal was served were less than impressed. When Bishop Dalderby visited Markyate Priory in Lincolnshire in 1300, he gave the prioress a copy of the decretal. As he was leaving, certain nuns hurled the decretal after him, and the prioress told him that he'd have to be kidding himself if he thought they'd abide by it.³⁸ The archbishops of York soon gave up trying to implement *Periculoso* – partly because of sister-resistance, and partly because it was utterly impracticable. As our nuns of Wintney have demonstrated, nuns needed to go outside the convent for alms; they also needed to look after the patronage they had already gained, and there were things that they could not

34 Atkinson focuses on Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries*: D. Atkinson, 'Canonsleigh Abbey: a Thriving Devon Nunnery?', *Ex Historia*, 7 (Exeter, 2015) pp.1-36. Knudsen gives a full historiography of the declinist narrative, 'Naughty Nuns', pp.16-31. Both discuss economics (Atkinson, *passim*; Knudsen, pp.31-46).

35 Logan, pp.69-70; Knudsen, p.126.

36 'Sanctorum fratrum qui apud Meritonam Domino famulantur et luce bonorum operum illustrant insulam nostram... tanto magis compatiator quanto certius habeo eosdem a laesione omnium abstinere et, quod omnibus insulanis patet, utilitati proximorum totis uiribus inseruire.' *John of Salisbury* i, pp.87-8. Nicholas Breakspeare was an Augustinian canon.

37 Quoted by E. Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p.345.

38 Power, p.352.

leave to agents.³⁹ Nuns as much as male religious were part of the local society and economy: to cut them off from it was impossible, as well as misguided.⁴⁰

Having dispensed with papal (mis)guidance, bishops quickly returned to traditional moral frameworks by which to judge nuns during their visitations. Penances imposed on nuns were broadly the same those imposed on monks or canons, comprising 1) an expression of humility by being placed at the bottom of the convent pack, 2) prayer and confession, 3) fasting (on Wednesdays and Fridays), 4) cessation of communication with the outside world, 5) prohibition from holding office, and 6), if necessary, removal for a time to another monastery. Canons were further prohibited from celebrating communion: they could be priests or deacons, and this was sort of double excommunication. As canonesses could not be ordained, this was not part of their penance. There are tales of nuns being kept in chains – the nun of Watton being an horrific example.⁴¹ However, male religious could also be clapped in irons, such as Leonard of Marton – or Roger of York, whose shackles were only released when his mother nearly dissolved the archbishop of York with her tears.⁴² Penance was not especially determined by sex. But sometimes there were clear differences according to sex. Joan of Barton was dismissed as prioress and kept in solitary confinement for her affair with the convent chaplain. By contrast, in 1314, John of Foxholes, prior of Newburgh, was found to have committed adultery with several women, but as he was a good prior in all other respects, he was allowed to keep his office.⁴³ Joan's indiscretion happened because women were not allowed to have a truly all-female house: disqualified from being priests, they needed male chaplains and confessors to guide and correct them, and to celebrate the eucharist for them. Thrown together, and in close contact, it's hardly surprising that nuns and their priests formed attachments. On the other hand, the crimes of John of Foxholes and brothers Alan, Stephen and Roger of Marton were their own deliberate faults, involving women from outside their priories. Given the emphasis on intention that appeared in confessional literature from the twelfth century onwards, it is a mark of male hypocrisy that their punishments were no harsher than, for example, Joan's. (I haven't found out what happened to Laurence the Chaplain, neither what happened to the women who consorted with the canons of Marton.)

I used to be a school teacher, and have seen government initiatives to improve schools through financial measures or central control of curriculum or extra exams – but a school is only as good as its head. This seems to have been the case with monasteries. In becoming an Augustinian, you would submit completely to the rule of the superior. If that superior showed weakness, this could unleash havoc on the whole monastery. Here's another case from Merton. In September 1305, Prior Edmund Herriard resigned, and this plunged the canons into, as Archbishop Winchelsey put it, 'discord and schism'. The matter was eventually sorted out, two elections and one year later, but meanwhile, the subprior was in charge of the Priory. Or rather, not quite in charge: in November, the bishop of Winchester wrote to the subprior, James of Dover, telling him to contain his canons during their interregnum: the lack of a prior had quickly loosened all ties of obedience, and canons were wandering abroad.⁴⁴

39 J. Burton, *Swine... Master...*

40 Tillotson, p.20.

41 G. Constable, 'Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order', in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford, 1981), pp.??.

42 Logan, p.154. For another example, see K. A. Smith, 'Discipline, compassion and monastic ideals of community, c.950–1250', *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009), p.327.

43 Greenfield, p.80, no.1325

The superior mattered, but so too did size. This is quite reasonable to suppose: it makes sense that one rotten apple will infect the rest more quickly and thoroughly if it's in a small cart with only a few other, tightly-packed, apples. And so we find that troubles at the priories of Marton, Moxby and Tandridge rumbled on for some years – and that chief troublemakers eventually became (for a time, at least) the monasteries' prelates. We could speculate about the psychology of those characters and the popularity of a rogue, but those would be better explored in historical fiction. However, a small house would mean that the pool from which superiors could be chosen – through whom discipline would be maintained – was little more than a puddle. If discipline had been undermined, it was often necessary to re-establish it with an outsider taking charge, and bishops had no hesitation in appointing prelates from other houses. Even this did not work sometimes, as we have seen in the cases of Thomas of St Albans or Philip of Wokingham at Tandridge. Discipline could easily dissolve even in larger houses, as we saw with the case of Edmund Herriard, but he was eventually replaced by a canon of the house, rather than an incomer.

The size of a monastery often affected its wealth, and this in turn could affect behaviour within the cloister. Smaller monasteries were normally poorer monasteries: Moxby in the 1320s was greatly in debt, partly as a result of the Scottish raid; Marton's poverty in the 1280s necessitated a new prior. In 1301, Archbishop Corbridge granted Marton an indulgence, and from this we can presume that it was still a poor house.⁴⁵ Tandridge's problems stemmed from a lack of accounting, which meant that the priory was probably neither getting nor paying its dues, and this carried on for most of the first half of the fourteenth century, coinciding with a number of other troubles with its canons. The importance of accurate and up-to-date accounting is clear from the Barnwell Observances, written in the 13th century, which describe the grainger as chief accounting officer, who kept a close eye on the seed, grain and money given to all monastic departments.⁴⁶ And it is obvious from bishops' registers, and a point made by Christian Knudsen, that the primary focus of episcopal visitations was financial management. Bishops needed to make sure that monasteries had enough money. They knew the potential moral effects of poverty: while apostolic poverty was the aim of the Augustinians, too much poverty would render the meditative, cloistered life of prayer impossible. The lack of a financial system at Tandridge alarmed the bishop greatly, and he strove to get its finances in order. Negative poverty could affect even large, busy houses like Merton: in 1310, Merton applied to Bishop Woodlock to appropriate the church of Cuddington, as they were oppressed by manifest poverty.⁴⁷ This was not necessarily just a formula for excusing the appropriation of a church: Merton provided a lot of hospitality over the years to various royal, noble and episcopal parties, and this must have taken its toll on Merton's barns and coffers. The relative cost of a religious house was probably about the same: smaller houses had less income, but less expenditure too, although there must have been some economies of scale.

Although it is extremely difficult to work out an individual's motivation – this is what Donald Logan called history's 'final frontier' – there were plenty of reasons for canonical lapse.⁴⁸ All novices were supposed to be of sound mind before entering the monastery,⁴⁹ but daily life could be relentless, repetitive, lacking in privacy, and the clauster could cause claustrophobia. One recent monk wrote of

44 Woodlock, i pp.65, 99-100. He also said that the priory seal must not be used except in the election of a new prior. Something fishy was going on at Southwark, too – pp.98, 108-9.

45 Reg. Corb. p.124, no.216.

46 *Barnwell Observances*, pp.188-91.

47 Woodlock, i p.446.

48 Logan, p.74.

49 See, e.g., *Barnwell Observances*.

neuroses which could be encountered in the cloister, suggesting that ‘souls affected with a serious neurosis should not be encouraged to remain in religion.’⁵⁰ Not remaining in religion was not an option for the mediaeval religious: they were there for life. On the flip side, routine has been shown to be beneficial for the human being, as I’m sure we ourselves have been made more aware of recently, and the health-giving qualities of meditational singing have also begun to be studied. In our examples, those who ran away had been canons or canonesses for some years, suggesting an accumulation of doubt or irritation. The stories of Leonard of Marton and William Kent, and perhaps John Paynell, suggest mental instability, and this seems to have been behind their violence. Accidental violence, like that displayed by Thomas Waltham, was quickly forgiven.

St Augustine himself knew about the temptations of the flesh and the errant nature of mankind – it was he, after all, who implored, ‘Oh Lord, make me chaste – but not yet!’. In his rule, Augustine counsels forgiveness and charity and the avoidance of harsh words, rather than meting out retributive punishments.⁵¹ Bishops’ actions reflected this: after penance had been sentenced, and the road of reconciliation with God was mapped out, preparing the road of reconciliation with the convent was next on the list.⁵² Bishops exhorted convents, male and female, to receive the misdoer back with charity and forgiveness. This was not just form: in 1414, the Bishop of Lincoln castigated the Prioress of Rothwell for not accepting an apostate canoness who had been living in sin with a man, and bound her to receive the nun back or herself be charged with disobedience.⁵³ The poor old nun of Watton, who probably didn’t want to be a nun in the first place, was thoroughly punished by her less-than-forgiving sisters. Their actions were looked on favourably by Aelred of Rievaulx, but then, he was a Cistercian and not a more flexible Augustinian.

Like in schools today, wrongdoers could be temporarily removed from their monastery, so as not to infect the rest of the convent, but also to break the habits and pack order of the miscreant. There was no need for Old-Testament-style retribution or public humiliation: your misdeed was ultimately your God’s to forgive, and his authorities on earth were to help reconciliation with God, not act as supreme arbiters themselves. Augustine’s rule makes clear that if punishment were to be exacted in Chapter, any visitors should leave the room first: humiliation was only to be shown to your fellow-religious, who themselves were expected to empathise (but not sympathise) with you, and not to rejoice in your misfortune. Rather than physical punishment, at the heart of a bishop’s penitential prescription was being barred from participating in the communal activities of a convent: this struck at the core of your monastic being, and would have been very powerful.

In the life-span of a monastery, misdoers and misdeeds could occur at any time. Institutional factors such as poverty could encourage laxity, as could personal factors such as time of life or length of time in the monastery. The histories of individual houses and the rich seam of historical information that is the bishops’ register shed light on how houses worked together, and about their relationships with secular clergy; about the mental health of religious, about the difference in attitude to male and female religious, about changes over time. They also show the efficacy of forgiveness and reconciliation. William Salyng sobered up after his episcopal chastisement and continued as prior until

50 Thomas Merton (ed. by Patrick Hart), ‘The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life’, *The Merton Annual* 4 (1991), p.3.

51 RSB, chap.6; RSA, chap.6.

52 For more on reconciliation, see Tjamke Snijders and Steven Vanderputten, ‘From Scandal to Monastic Penance: A Reconciliatory Manuscript from the Early Twelfth-Century Abbey of St. Laurent in Liège’, *Church History* 82 (2013), pp. 523-553.

53 R. M. Serjeantson and W. R. D. Adkins (eds), *A History of the County of Northampton* ii (London, 1906), pp. 137-138.

his death in 1520, by which time the canons were nearly up to quota, at a respectable 21, respectable apparently the operative word. The suppression of the monasteries in 1538 was a complete surprise, and the attacks on monastic morality and religious depravity by the 'reformers' were little more than the rhetoric of blame, which we see very much alive in our politics today. Given the numbers of monks, nuns and canons, miscreants were relatively small in number, which means that most religious kept to their vows, or committed human errors which were too small to be noted in writing. There were loose canons – and contrary canonesses – but, colourful as they make history, they were but few. In the main, mediaeval monastics were just 'regular guys'.