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The Abbey of SS. Mary and Sexburgha, Minster-in-Sheppey, Kent

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THIRTEEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO Egbert, King of Kent, granted his mother's request for land on which to build a nunnery for 77 Benedictine nuns. His mother was the widowed Queen Sexburgha. The site was upon the elevated side of a bleak and desolate island just north of the Kentish Downs, called the Isle of Sheppey.

From the nunnery the nuns had, to the south and west, a commanding view of the lowest parts of the island—its flat, bare marshes, and, to the north and east, the windswept plateau terminating in clay cliffs and the sea. Exposed to all winds, they must have often felt the salt spray on their faces, have seen the marshes flood at spring tides, have lived very much at one with the environment, protected from its wildness by the solid stone walls of the nunnery. This jutted out of the green and brown, perpendicular—the first sign of civilisation upon a seemingly un-

cast lump of clay. But the desolate site of the nunnery had been trodden before—by the Romans. In building the Nuns' Chapel some tiles from a pagan temple were used. Despite the violent ravages of the Danes in 835 and 1052, during which the nuns were either killed or driven away, and despite many further crises, an abbey still stands today upon the original site to represent one of the earliest monastic foundations in England.

The squat timber tower of the Abbey is disproportionate with the rest of the building. The plans were for it to be a full scale tower but it was in the process of being built at the time of the Dissolution. The six bells (10 cwt. 2 qr.) were recast in 1929 by Messrs. Mears and Stainbank. Five of the bells were cast in 1663 by William Hatch, one in 1602 by Joseph Hatch—brought from the old Warden Church at the east of the island which had collapsed in a landslide. In 1973 a great

improvement was made in the ringing facilities by the construction of a ringers' loft. This allows the ringers more privacy in ringing and provides more light and space than did the rather dingy downstairs area which is now used for vestries.

Minster Abbey has much to offer the historian. It consists of a hotchpotch of building representing the trials, tribulations and moments of enlightenment of many ages. To mark our centenary year the St. Sexburgha Chapel—the north-eastern portion of the Abbey which comprises some of the oldest stones—was on April 26, dedicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. It has now been furnished with pews and is used for weekday services. On July 6 this year—St. Sexburgha's Day—the Abbey will be adorned with flowers. We warmly invite you to our festival week-end so that you may breathe in the mingled scent of fresh flowers and ancient stone, and join with us in the commemoration of our saint and founder.