

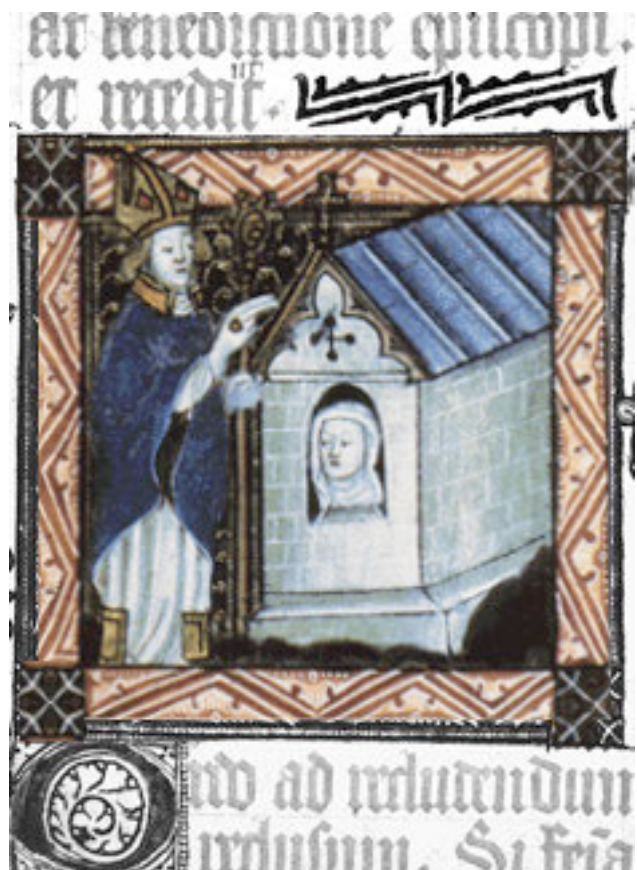
WIMARK, THE ANCHORESS OF FRODSHAM

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How many people have heard of the anchoress of Frodsham? In medieval England life was short, often hard and uncertain. Religious feelings were high. Everyone had an unquestioning belief in God and the prospect of heaven or hell after death was a part of everyone's thinking. Many people were moved to give up their lives in total commitment to God in the community of a monastery. However, this was not the only way to devote one's life to God in the Middle Ages. There were also solitary religious people like hermits, anchorites and anchoresses.

Hermits differed from anchorites and anchoresses in that they could leave their selected place of hermitage, while anchorites and anchoresses were required to live the rest of their lives in a walled-up cell. The anchorage or anchorholds were similar to hermitages, but rather than living alone in forests or caves the anchoress lived within a community. The anchorhold was often attached to the wall of a church. Considerable numbers of women decided to live by themselves in a life of contemplation. These women were known as anchoresses - not because they were anchored to a church, but because of a Greek word, *anachorein*, meaning "to go apart". In the twelfth to the thirteenth century there were 92 anchoresses in England (and only 20 anchorites).

It is important to remember that life was very harsh in England, including Cheshire, in medieval times. Only the stronger and more powerful members of society could feel secure. The rest of society was at risk if they had any possessions, no matter how small, or if they caused offence, whether deliberate or not. We imagine that wealthy and powerful people had a relatively comfortable life in these times, but this was not true for many women. Women had few or no rights, whether they were of noble or low birth. There were many wars in medieval times and diseases were prevalent: life could be short, resulting in many young widows and heirs whose estates were of interest to the Crown. Women who inherited significant estates were 'within the gift of the King'. During the reign of Henry III, for example, such women were freely sold in marriage to the highest bidder or offered in marriage to the King's friends. Lists of ladies, boys and girls in such circumstances were advertised among the influential.



In times like these it may be that women who felt themselves at risk, and maybe had strong religious fervour and conviction, may have envied the security of those who elected to retire from the irreligious brutality of life in medieval society.

The earliest reference to an anchoress, or female recluse, in Frodsham dates from 1240. The pipe rolls for the period 19th December 1240 to Christmas 1242 mention alms of 1d a day being paid to the anchoress.

A woman could not simply decide to become an anchoress for religious fervour or other reasons. The decision was irreversible once it was made, so the Church went to great lengths to spell out what the decision entailed. The Church only considered applicants whose credentials were impeccable. This was a long process: they examined the motives and antecedents of the applicant and needed acceptable referees to back them up. The Bishop was the final authority. There is no surviving record of the licensing of the anchoress of Frodsham, but there is no reason to believe that it was not stringent.

- . The actual physical enclosure of the anchoress was preceded by a lengthy church service. After this, there was a ceremony normally conducted by the Bishop, outside the cell of the anchoress, which was then walled up. These proceedings gave the anchoress a last chance to reconsider if she wished. The ceremony was similar to the rites of burial and it was made clear that the anchoress was entering what was, in effect, her tomb. Thereafter she was considered dead to the world and given the last rites. Bishop Meuland was the Bishop at the time when the Frodsham anchoress was licensed.

The Bishop had to ensure that an anchoress had enough resources to sustain her. The anchorite's cell was located either in the churchyard, or under the church, or attached to it. In the case of Frodsham, the cell is probably under the present chancel that was later extended and remodelled. JP Dodd believed the cell coincides with what is now thought to be the former chancel house. It is possible that the use of the cell as a chancel house followed some time after the death of the anchoress in 1279-80 and at a time when the religious significance of the cell had passed from local memory. However, the east wall of the chancel is rather later than the thirteenth century so it seems more probable that the cell may lie at the church end of this chancel house, the latter having been constructed when the chancel was extended.

Although Wimark's cell was sheltered from contact with the corrupting world, the anchoress would have been able to listen to, and join in with, church services taking place overhead. She would have had at least one daily visitor to bring her the necessary provisions, bought with her 1d. Some anchoresses had a servant maid but there is no record of this at Frodsham. She would also have had visits from her appointed father confessor, with whom she could communicate in time of emergency.

It was likely that, on the floor of her cell, there will have been a stone coffin lid to remind her of her death. The cell itself would have been built out of timber or stone. In fact it will have been more like a small house than a cell. It may have had a window through the church wall looking into the chancel so that she could see the altar and receive the sacrament. There was another window looking to the outside

world through which she could talk to visitors - this was usually curtained so that her concentration on prayer should not be disturbed.



A close-up view of what is possibly the blocked-up window of the anchoress' cell, with a metal pin top left that might have been the hinge for a shutter.

She was not allowed to leave her cell, but some anchoresses had a room adjoining it where her maid would have lived, and cooked for her, collected water and attended to the fire. She was not meant to live a hard ascetic life, but one without luxury or disturbance. In the case of Frodsham, there is no record of a servant maid living with her, but there would have been a maid who visited her daily. Her maid could go and visit people in the village and bring back news of importance. The local priest would have cared for her spiritually. She would have had books to read: the psalms, the offices and books on contemplation and writing materials.

It is possible that the Frodsham anchoress had a manuscript copy of the text for the solitary religious, the *Ancrene Riwe* or *Ancrene Wisse* (Rule for Nuns). Understandably, in her solitary life, despite her reliance on prayer, the anchoress would have had periods of melancholy, self-pity and visions of the devil in the form of the Tempter, as well as visions of Christ and his angels. The *Ancrene Riwe* told her how to cope with these events and gave her prayers to say at appropriate times.

There was no required dress for an anchoress but in winter a pilch (a triangular piece of material) or a thick garment to keep out the cold would have been her likely clothing. In summer she probably wore a kirtle with mantle, black headdress, wimple, cape or veil. The one stipulation was that the dress had to be plain. She would have lived in extreme poverty, eating chiefly vegetarian food. The life of an anchoress would be spent in prayer and contemplation. Other solitary pursuits were also followed, especially embroidery and writing. The anchoress would also receive people who would seek her advice on both practical and religious matters. The anchoress would offer prayers for these people and pray with them. Some people have speculated that there were actually two anchoresses at Frodsham. The grant of alms of 30s 4d per annum disappears from the records for a few years. It is mentioned again at

Michaelmas 1274, when the anchoress is named as Wimark and receives 30s 4d per annum in the accounts for Michaelmas 1274 to Michaelmas 1275. The grant continues the following year. In the accounts for Michaelmas 1277 to Michaelmas 1278 she is recorded as Wymarkie anacrite de Frodsham. There is further mention of her in the accounts up to Michaelmas 1280. The payment terminates with the statement in the accounts of King Edward for 1279-80 'Paid to the recluse of Frodsham as an alms of 1d a day, 1 mark and not more because she died.'

There seem to be two possibilities:

- The anchoress, Wimark, was enclosed at Frodsham until she died, aged 60 or more.
- There were two anchoresses, one taking up residence just a few years after the death of the first.

The first possibility is feasible. There are other recorded examples of long service, such as Dame Julian of Norwich (although she was later). Julian of Norwich was in her 31st year in May 1373 and was still alive in 1413, aged 71.

So who was the anchoress of Frodsham? She must have been a person of significance as her cell was constructed long after the original church was built. This would have been at a large financial cost. Also, she received payment of royal alms lasting from the reign of Henry III into the reign of his successor, Edward I.

Dodd speculates that Wymarkie owned lands in Frodsham demesne, or that this land may have been subject to some kind of rental charge to support the anchoress's expenses. The Arrentation Roll of about 1346 mentions land described as Wimarke's Furlong rented at 5s 7½ d. (Dodd notes that this, in itself, is interesting as she had been dead some 66 years, yet her name persisted.) At the time, the church lay within the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. The bishop himself had to be personally responsible for the anchoress.

Two documents have been found, dating to the time of Bishop Meuland (1258 – 1296) referring to Wimark:

- Quitclaim from Wymarc, daughter of Richard Tanner (Tannator) of Bauquell (Bakewell, Derbyshire) in her free widow's right....to the Dean and Chapter of Lichfield and the church of Bauquell, of a third part of her toft which she holds of that church and its village, lying towards the east adjoining the toft of John the clerk with a house built thereon.
- Quitclaim from Thomas, son and heir of Wymarc, widow of Adam Mercer (Mercator) of Bauquell of all his right in the toft which his mother held of the Dean and Chapter of Lichfield...the which toft lies between the toft of John the clerk and that of Mathew le Sureis.

It seems likely that this is Wimark, who became anchoress of Frodsham. As a widow with land she would have been under pressure to re-marry (and disinherit her son). She probably found this distasteful. She may have approached the Bishop for permission to become a solitary religious. Bakewell was also under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield at this time. She abandoned worldly interests so it would not have mattered that her cell was far from her worldly home.

Dodd ends his account of Wimark, anchoress of Frodsham, with one last interesting piece of speculation: it is possible that Wimark's bones still lie in the cell, behind the bricked-up aperture that may lead to the remains of her cell.

Source:

J.P. Dodd, The Anchoress of Frodsham 1240 – 1280, in Cheshire History, autumn 1981, No 8, p30-51

The medieval illustration – Enclosure of an Anchoress – can be found at a number of sites online, e.g.

http://www.historyfish.net/anchorites/clay_anchorites_eight.html

<http://www.umilta.net/pontifical.html>