

**Edith G. Stedman** (author), **Margot Metcalfe** (compiler), *A Yankee in an English Village: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, Dorchester Abbey Parochial Church Council 2021, 94 + v pp., £9.99.

The book, written by Edith G Stedman, was first published in 1971 and this 2021 reissue has a new preface, postscript, photos and end notes added by Margot Metcalfe, a member of the Dorchester Historical Society. All proceeds from the sale of the book go to the restoration and repair of the ancient Monastery Guest House of Dorchester Abbey, something which, I am sure, Edith Stedman would have heartily approved. Much of the focus of the book is on her fundraising work for the Abbey. The museum and shop are based in the Monastery Guest House and Edith often mentions the monks who sat there to hand out ‘dole’ or bread and beer to pilgrims to the St Birinus Shrine. As she created and ran a gift shop from the building, she obviously felt an affinity between her volunteer role at the Abbey and the past monks helping the pilgrims.

Edith Stedman was a social worker and college administrator from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her papers from 1913 to 1978 are held in Harvard and are split between personal correspondence and records of her fundraising activities on behalf of Dorchester Abbey. It is easy to see how this became a major priority for the later part of her life. On her retirement from Head of the Appointments Bureau of Radcliffe College, Edith began to spend 6 months each year in England, living with friends at the Manor House in Dorchester. She founded the American Friends of Dorchester Abbey, which raised money for the conversion of the Cloister Gardens into an Anglo-American Garden. Then they raised funds to restore the great Tree of Jesse window, which was done as a memorial to Sir Winston Churchill. She also worked hard to raise funds to restore the fabric of the Abbey. Her Dorchester Abbey Journals were copied and circulated among friends. Edith enjoyed writing, therefore I assume the popularity of her journals and the interest in her work lead to the creation of this book, with the aim to raise yet more money for the Abbey.

The book gives a bit of the Abbey’s history but it also includes the village and the story of the two are intertwined throughout Edith’s tale. The beginning explains why she, an American, came to be so closely involved in the Abbey. Edith introduces both the Abbey (including its renovation by Butterfield and ‘what I think are dreadful blue and white lavatory tiles’!) and states:

‘I do wish everyone could feel about the place the way I do... its absolute peace gives a sense of remoteness, of timelessness, of being only a link in a long chain.’

Dorchester Abbey can be found in Dorchester Upon Thames, sat between the Thames and the River Thame. It is said that this is where Saint Birinus, who was sent by Pope Honorius I to convert the Anglo Saxons to Christianity, baptised King Cynegils in the presence of King Oswald in 635AD. Cynegils and Oswald gave Birinus some land in Dorchester to build a Cathedral, which he did. Bishop Birinus died in 650 and was buried in Dorchester. His relics were moved to Winchester c.690, and there is a debate as to where they are now, however Dorchester Abbey and the Shire of St Birinus became a place of pilgrimage. The building started as a Saxon cathedral in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it was expanded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and had the chancel, with its Tree of Jesse window, added in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Edith declares early on that ‘right from the beginning I was fascinated by the Abbey’ and that she started to give tours of the place to share her knowledge and fulfil people’s curiosity. In 1958 the parish got a new Vicar who was an architect and keen to restore the Abbey. At this point the book introduces snippets of one of Edith’s letters to America and the rest of the chapters continue this epistolary approach of including quotes from Edith’s diary and correspondence to explain what was going on.

The book is written chronologically, from Chapter I covering 1958, Chapter II 1960 and so on, with Edith charting the achievements, incidents, festivals and committees each year, as well as the difficulties of fundraising. She arrives in Dorchester each year in the spring, is heavily involved in church and village life for the next few months and returns to the States in the autumn.

Edith became keen to raise money towards the Abbey restoration as an ‘American gift’, enough to match the £140 Sir Richard Beauforrest paid for the Abbey during the Dissolution of the Monasteries (this was the value of the lead on the chancel roof and his act saved the building). The money raised would go towards the Abbey garden and a Garden Committee is created. The book covers all the many committees and meetings held over Edith’s time in Dorchester and her outsider view as an American attending English meetings is light-hearted and a snapshot in time (though it will also remind many readers of endless meetings that they may have had to attend for work!). Each chapter looks at a different annual project and fundraising aim. For example, Chapter IV tells of Edith’s idea to create a Monastery Guest House Cook Book, with recipes from different religious orders from all over the world. It is a lovely unifying suggestion, in the days before the global community we take for granted today. She managed to get Sir Basil Blackwell (head of the publishing firm) involved – so she is a woman of resources and a determination to not take no for an answer. I did rather feel sorry for some of these business people (including Mr Palmer of Huntley and Palmer, when she decided to make shortbread to be sold to tourists) Edith strongarmed into helping with her projects. You can tell she was a very driven and persuasive woman.

The book is an insight into village life in the 1960s-70s, with its annual fairs, the quiet drama of everyday life, the village characters (and ghosts!) and how the Abbey dominated the community. It shows the differences in attitude and approaches between the American and English and how important church life was to society at that time. A ‘character list’ at the beginning of the book could be useful – the explanatory notes at the back were insightful, but also contained other detailed information so a separate area focused purely on the names and relationships could be a useful guide.

*A Yankee in an English Village* is reminiscent of the TV shows *Heartbeat* or *Call The Midwife*, with the comedy moments, the occasional miscreants, the historic record of what life was like in Britain in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There is the trouble of small boys throwing apples in Chapter II and breaking priceless historic windows. Then the rather more threatening ‘unsavoury looking youth’ in Chapter V in 1964 who was spotted ‘sharpening a switch-blade knife in the garden’ and found ‘on his knees trying to open one of the collection boxes’. I loved the description later in the same chapter of the ‘five small locals ranging in age from 5 to 11’ rushing to tell the museum volunteers that ‘them kids from Benson’ had stolen some donations and a skull from the crypt. As a resident of South Oxfordshire, it made me smile that local rivalry has always existed, as has the mischief of small children.

I am a Museum Curator and was approached to write this review because of my talks on local history of South Oxfordshire. So it is with a small degree of rising panic that I read the section where Edith and friends clean the 'Knight', a fine example of 13<sup>th</sup> century sculpture, with soap, water and scrubbing brushes for a Music and Drama Festival (one of many local festivals described in the book), not least when she then describes being able to see traces of crimson and green in the folds of the statue's tunic. Any conservators reading this will be horrified at the potential damage and loss of the original paint, but well-meaning untrained people attempting to help with the restoration of church artwork is nothing new!

Chapter VIII, the final chapter, is called "The Queen Mother" and reads as a culmination of all Edith's work. She returns from America in Spring 1970 and on her first day back in England discovers that a corbel with her face has been added to Dorchester Abbey. There is a photo on the back cover of the book. A corbel is a piece of architecture that projects out of a building and acts as a base for an arch, roof or beam, or can just be used for decoration. What a touching tribute in appreciation of all her efforts, to immortalise Edith in the Abbey itself! (Edith's corbel replaced an 800-year-old monk whose face had disintegrated. It felt like a potential moral was there somewhere). This generated some news nationally and Edith was interviewed by the BBC. However, the real focus for that year is the Queen Mother's visit to celebrate the restoration of the Abbey. The light relief of the last chapter is Edith admitting 'I made an awful gaffe. I learnt over and patted [The Queen Mother's] knee and was aghast at what I had done. I said most contritely "I do apologise. Your Majesty, I know better, please forgive me." She very politely smiled and said it did not matter.... At that point Sir Martin Gilliat (her secretary) or Lady Gibb yanked me away just as I was warming up'. It is a lovely glimpse into the experience of members of the public meeting the Royal family, how human we all are and how they handle it. With the focus on the Royal family at the moment, it shows the many public functions they attend and the people they meet.

The book finishes with Edith leaving England in November 1970, after several references to her poor health and queries if she will ever make it back. The new postscript by Margot Metcalfe tells us that she did but that there is no account in her book. We are told Edith died in Boston on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1978 and her ashes are buried at Dorchester. I cannot imagine finishing the book with her last visit and not knowing what happened next, so the new edition definitely makes for a more complete read.

In conclusion, I feel this book is interesting as a historic record of Dorchester village life in the 1950s-60s. It also records the differences between Americans and English, while revelling in the friendships and support given across the countries. I did struggle with following different people's names and roles and why they were important, though that may have been Edith's more informal style and assumption the reader would know the people involved. A glossary of religious terms and ceremonies would be beneficial – I admit I still do not know what a collect is in a church setting, though it is definitely different from a collection plate! Having read the book several time, the purpose of it is not clear. I am not sure if it is meant to act as just a record of her own experiences. Or if it is predominantly meant to be a record of the Abbey's restoration and how the fundraising was carried out. Either way, it will be valued by those who live locally and recognise the people involved or by people interested in the history of the Abbey and the village. It is also rather wonderful that Edith is still contributing to the caretaking of the building she so loved.

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