ONE THOUSAND years ago, Ethelwold—second of Winchester's saints after Swithun—was consecrated Bishop, in 963. This date seems immensely remote—oddly, almost more so than Caesar’s invasion of Britain in 55 B.C., 1,000 years earlier. The time-perspective is curious, when one recalls that 500 years before Ethelwold there was the legendary Anglo-Saxon invasion of Hengist and Horsa (450-465); 500 years after, 1461 saw the end of Henry VI’s reign in the Wars of the Roses.

English history before the Conquest seems strangely unreal. After 1066, it is like a film strip—a continuous, ever-rolling stream of time and events, well recorded and fully peopled. But before 1066 there are only a few sporadic shafts of light—Bede’s “History” in the early 700’s, then almost nothing till Alfred (d. 899)—though at Winchester we half-remember
SWITHUN AND CELEBRATED HIS 1100TH ANNIVERSARY LAST YEAR—THEN, UNTIL THE CONQUEST, ONLY CANUTE (D. 1035) AND EDWARD THE CONFESSOR. THEIR VERY NAMES—ETHELWOLD, OR RATHER ÀbbEELWOLD, SEEM UNEOUTH. COULd IT BE THAT, JUST AS THE NORMANS DELIBERATELY OBLITERATED OUR SAXON CATHEDRALS, THEY WERE ALSO QUITE GLAD FOR US TO FORGET OUR SAXON PAST?

Ethelwold, and his times, are worth trying to conjure back into our historical imagination. He lived during a short interlude when the arts of peace could flourish. Alfred had tied down the Danish invaders into the territory of the Danelaw—east of Watling Street. Under his son and grandson, Edward the Elder (d. 924) and Athelstan (d. 940), the House of Wessex, with their capital at Winchester, gradually established their rule as far as Northumbria and over the Danelaw. So it was that, when Edgar became king in 959—his millenary was celebrated by the Hampshire Field Club four years ago—the stage was set for three devout, cultured, but energetic men to lead a great reformation of the English church and a great renaissance in English art.

As often then and for many later centuries, leading churchmen, future bishops, were nurtured in "court circles". These three were no exception. Dunstan (Archbishop of Canterbury 959-988), Ethelwold (Bishop of Winchester 963-984), and Oswald (Bishop of Worcester 960-971, Archbishop of York 972-993), all came from leading families and rose to notice about the court. Ethelwold was born in Winchester. What we know of him shows the marks of genius—with the difficulties of personality that often go with it—very able, and an avid scholar, learned in the mathematics (Record, 1958, p. 4-5) : a devoted patron of the visual arts : a leader of men, though a very exacting one : of tireless energy and great organizing power : described as terrible as a lion to the wicked, but also merciful as a dove : an albino, who suffered constantly from stomach pains, leg tumours and insomnia : practically a vegetarian : above all, burning to reform and renew English monasticism.

This was a great moment in the Church’s history. The founding of the Abbey of Cluny in Burgundy in 910 and the rise of its daughter houses, such as Fleury (St. Benoit-sur-Loire) founded in 930, led to a great movement of reformation and renewal of western monasticism. The Benedictine Rule was restored—its early purity and religious observances now enriched with the beauty of pure Gregorian chant, splendid buildings, altars adorned with gold and silver and rich manuscript service books in gold and jewelled covers.
In England, this movement first flowered at Glastonbury—head and fount of English Christianity. Dunstan’s earliest task, when he had felt the call to religion, was, as Abbot of Glastonbury (943-9), to recreate there the first proper monastery that had existed in England for two generations, rebuilding and enlarging the church, acquiring books for a monastic school. Ethelwold and he had been friends in the court at Winchester and they had been ordained together there on the same day. So it was natural that Ethelwold soon became Dunstan’s prior at Glastonbury—though the two men were very different in character.

Some years later, drawn by the magnet of Fleury, Ethelwold longed to go there and learn the new monastic observances at first hand. He was only prevented by the king calling him, in 954, to be abbot of the monastery of Abingdon—then, like most English houses, physically and morally decayed. Ethelwold’s nine years at Abingdon transformed it into what was to be one of the greatest of our monasteries—until the self-interested surrender of its last Abbot in 1538. Ethelwold rebuilt the abbey church as a double rotunda, or with double apses, and with a round tower. The chronicler says that he wrought with his own hands bells, an organ, an altar retable of gold and silver, with the twelve apostles, and a gold-plated revolving wheel or candelabrum, with twelve lamps and innumerable bells around it; Dunstan was similarly famed as an artificer in precious metals—which may be why his detractors called him a magician. Ethelwold sent Osgar, one of his monks, later Abbot of Abingdon, to study the observance at Fleury and he brought monks to Abingdon from another great French monastery, Corbie near Amiens, to instruct the community in chanting. One of his important works at Abingdon was a water channel for the monastery, a foretaste of the Lockburn which he made for the monasteries at Winchester.

When Edgar, the “peaceable”, succeeded as king in 959, Dunstan became very soon Archbishop; the see of Winchester fell vacant in 963 and Ethelwold was called to fill it. Edgar had probably spent part of his youth in Abingdon, with Ethelwold as his tutor; from now onwards Ethelwold, rather than Dunstan, seems to have been the king’s chief counsellor.

Later monastic chroniclers, gloating over the discomfiture of their “secular” rivals, perhaps made too much of the dramatic episode of Ethelwold’s expulsion of the “secular canons” of the Old Minster or Cathedral, on the first Saturday of Lent, February 21st, 964, which figured in last year’s “Son et Lumière”. The story goes that, after sternly remonstrating
[by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Durham]

ST. ETHELWOLD AND ST. DUNSTAN (see Note 2)
THE ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM ON THE FIRST PALM SUNDAY: FROM THE BENEDICTIONAL OF ST. ETHELWOLD (see Note 4)
at the reluctance of the Winchester canons to follow the Rule, in abstinence, fasting and discarding of their wives, ever putting off the day—"Cras, cras"; "Tomorrow, tomorrow" they said—he faced them with a body of his "regular" monks from Abingdon bearing monastic cowls. The bishop bade the Abingdon monks to cast down the cowls before the altar and the Winchester canons to don them. The canons marched out in a fury—though three of them later repented and followed the Rule—appealing to the king. The chronicler records another dramatic scene in the Old Minster refectory, when the King in Council, when Dunstan ruled—inspired it was said by a miraculous glance from the Crucifix upon the refectory wall—that the Old Minster must be served by "regulars" not "seculars". Ethelwold filled many of the canons’ places with Abingdon monks. Soon after, he pushed through a similar reform at the New Minster, the great monastery founded by King Alfred which, until its transfer to Hyde in 1110, lay beside the Old Minster Cathedral, on the north. The adjacent Nunnaminster was similarly reformed.

These local reforms were a symptom of much wider, more constructive, changes in the life of the English church. Some time during the period 965-975, King Edgar convoked in Winchester a great Church Council—worth recalling in this year of the Vatican Council. To it there came the English bishops, abbesses, abbots and monks and also learned men from Fleury and St. Peters, Ghent (where Dunstan had spent a period around 956 when under a cloud at court). The Council’s task was to work out a code of English observance of the Benedictine Rule, embodying all that was best, and most seemly, in the modern observances on the continent, including the ninth century reforms of Benedict of Aniane. One of the few specifically English features was the emphasis laid on prayers for the king and the royal family. The work of the Council, unlike many conferences, reached concrete conclusions, embodied in the so-called "Regularis Concordia Anglicanae Nationis Monachorum Sanctimonialiumque"; "The Monastic Concord of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation". Ethelwold almost certainly drafted this important document. He seems to have been the real leader of the Council (Plate IV).

Of Ethelwold’s influence on the life of the Church, we know from another source. One of the pupils of his cathedral school was Aelfric, the learned writer, in Anglo-Saxon, of homilies for saints’ days, commentaries on the bible and sermons. Aelfric records that he owed much of his learning to Ethelwold (Record, 1958, p. 8). It is significant that, at the Reformation, Matthew Parker, Elisabeth I’s archbishop, caused some of Aelfric’s
writings to be published—the first books ever printed in Anglo-
Saxon—to show that practices such as communion of the laity
in both bread and wine, and our doctrines about the Sacrament
were accepted in the days of Aelfric and Ethelwold and that,
in our protestant Reformation, the Church of England was
therefore reverting to earlier practices of “Ecclesia Anglicana”.

One of Ethelwold’s greatest works was to bring the light of
the new, reformed, monasticism back to the fenland of East
Anglia, in the heart of the Danelaw, where it had been well nigh
extinguished by the Danes. Once-famous monasteries were in
ruins—at Ely, founded by the Northumbrian virgin Queen
Etheldreda in the seventh century, at Crowland, famed for the
hermit Guthac in that century, and at Thorney, on the desolate
isle of thorns, near Crowland. These three, together with
Ethelwold’s restored foundation to St. Peter at Medeshamstede,
now Peterborough, were transformed by his energy in a short
space of years into beacons of the new monasticism. Remarkably,
one of the greatest glories of the Ethelwoldian Old and New
Minsters at Winchester—the writing and illumination of manu-
scripts—flourished so speedily in the renewed Fenland monas-
teries, including Bishop Oswald’s foundations at Ramsay, that
it is hardly possible to tell from internal evidence whether a
book of this period was written in the Fenland or at Winchester.
They are all of the “Winchester School of Illumination”.
Only recently has it been demonstrated that the famous Bene-
dictional of St. Ethelwold itself must be a Winchester book,
made at the New or Old Minster (Plate V).

To posterity, these works are the greatest of Ethelwold’s
gifts. True, the Winchester Minsters were producing great
manuscripts earlier in the tenth century, before he was bishop.
Also, of course, many other factors combined to produce this
noble outpouring—one of the greatest artistic achievements of
England, and indeed of Europe. There was a unique combina-
tion of circumstances—the mobilising by the new Cluniac
monasticism of all forms of beauty in divine worship: an
art-loving court and a country at peace: the aesthetic motifs
of Carolingian–Ottonian art, brought here by itinerant European
monks, but refashioned and transformed by vigorous native
English genius. But it can be no coincidence that there was a
dramatic, and wonderful, outpouring of manuscripts from the
two Winchester Minsters, and from the renewed Fenland
monasteries, in the second half of the tenth century. More than
any other man, Ethelwold must have inspired it.

Of course, the beautiful things in Ethelwold’s churches were
not confined to manuscript books—though, thanks to Elisabethan
and Jacobean antiquaries, some of these have been preserved for us. We know of his golden altar and candelabrum at Abingdon. What more must he not have created to beautify Winchester? But all such things have been lost—the Abingdon treasures as early as the Conquest, when a visiting Norman monk absconded with them and took them to Jumièges.

What of Ethelwold's buildings? Must not they too have been of a magnificence fit to match the treasures within? The Cantor Wulfstan and the monk Lantfred, of the Old Minster, described around 1000 the Old Minster Cathedral as it had been gloriously restored and rebuilt by Ethelwold and his successor Bishop Alphege, in the years following 971; in that year Ethelwold translated the body of St. Swithun from his humble grave outside the west door of the Old Minster to a glorious shrine within (Record, 1956, p. 8 : 1957, p. 3).

Elsewhere in the present Record, is an account of excavations in two trenches just north of the Cathedral last year, which are the start of a serious attempt to find what still may lie buried, below the soil of Winchester, of the foundations, and maybe some of the adornments, of the Old Minster, the New Minster and—one day perhaps—the Nunnaminster. The Winchester Excavations Committee, with the welcome co-operation of the Dean and Chapter, plans to continue this excavation work, in search of the Saxon Minsters, this summer and in successive years.

NOTES

1. St. Dunstan. The association of St. Dunstan's name with the blind is completely modern, dating only from the first World War, when the Hertford mansion, St. Dunstan's Lodge in Regent's Park, became the first hospital for blind wounded (following the Hertford family's tradition in founding the Hertford Hospital in Paris after the Franco-Prussian war). St. Dunstan's Lodge had that name because it bore on its facade two large clock-figures, which the third Lord Hertford, one of the creators of the Wallace Collection, had bought from the church of St. Dunstan's-in-the-West, in Fleet Street.

2. Plate IV: Ethelwold and Dunstan. This miniature is from a manuscript of Aelfric's Grammar at Durham (B iii, 32, fol. 56 b). Except that the crowned figure of King Edgar, between the two bishops, is omitted, the drawing is almost identical with, and was probably copied from, that forming Plate II of the 1958 Record, which is prefixed to a British Museum manuscript of the Regularis Concordia (BM Cotton. Tib. A. iii, fol. 2 b). Professor Wormald has shown that both manuscripts probably came originally from Canterbury (British Museum Quarterly, IX (1934-5), p. 113). It seems clear that, in the B.M. MS, the right-hand figure, with archbishop's pallium, depicts Dunstan: the left-hand one, with pastoral staff, Ethelwold. In the Durham grammar, the figures may have been intended to represent two disputants, but they are almost exact copies of the figures of Dunstan and Ethelwold in the B.M. MS. Their very distinctive features
look like portraits. The genuflecting figure of a monk, below, holds a roll which, in the B.M. MS, represents the Regularis Concordia; here it is inscribed, in a later hand—"loke yp ryth al way and pu schalt loke as fur that a p u dost a daye".

3. Archbishop Parker and Aelfric. A recent article, J. Bromwich, "The First Book Printed in Anglo-Saxon Types" (Trans. Camb. Bibliographical Soc. III, Pt. IV (1962), p. 265) discusses (p. 271-2) the political and doctrinal reasons for the official publication, in 1566, of Aelfric’s "Easter Homily" as A Testimonie of Antiquitie. The manuscript for the printer was signed by Archbishop Parker and his bench of Bishops and was published by authority of Queen Elizabeth Ist’s Privy Council.

4. Plate V: Benedictional of St. Ethelwold. In this miniature of the first Palm Sunday (B.M. Add. MSS. 49598, fol. 45 b), Christ, with gold halo, long gold tunic and blue mantle, rides on a light brown ass, against a green background. The group of nine apostles carry golden palm branches. The arched gateway of Jerusalem is gold; the buildings have blue tiles. Youths, one with a hatchet, are casting down branches with yellow or golden flowers, like large daffodils, and a light blue garment is being spread in the way of the ass. The frame of the miniature is of gold.

A Benedictional is a collection of blessings, for various Sundays and holy days, to be said over the congregation by a Bishop. One of the pages of this book says that it was made for Bishop Ethelwold. Until recently, the Benedictional had been thought to be, quite probably, an Ely work. But Professor Francis Wormald has recently found a fragment of what must be a Hyde Abbey manuscript bound into the medieval binding. The Benedictional is thus almost certainly a Winchester book, made at the Old or the New Minster. It has recently been transferred from Chatsworth to the British Museum, where it is on view. The Benedictional is included in the Faber Library of Illuminated Manuscripts series, Ed. F. Wormald (1959 : 8 coloured plates, 25s.).