

ART. XVI.—*A Note on the Foundation of Lanercost Priory.** By J. C. DICKINSON, M.A., B.Litt.

THE evidence on the foundation of Lanercost priory is scanty and confusing. The tradition ascribing its origins to the year 1116 has long been proved false† and the generally accepted date is now 1169;‡ but this view is one which requires some modification.

The founder of Lanercost priory, Robert de Vaux, acquired the barony of Gilsland about 1165§ and perhaps made plans for the new house of regular canons soon after. For, as Canon Wilson writing in the Victoria County History correctly points out, the well-known foundation charter of the house given in the *Monasticon*|| was drawn up at a late stage in the proceedings, when the foundation “was evidently practically complete”¶ and belongs to a time “probably earlier if anything than the traditional date 1169.”**

The evidence on which this traditional date rests, is a note in the transcript of the Lanercost cartulary now in the Dean and Chapter Library at Carlisle—“anno ab incarnatione domini 1169 16 Hen. 2 Dedicata fuit ista ecclesia a domino Bernardo Episcopo Karl. anno pontificatus eiusdem xii.” The note is so important for our purpose that it is unfortunate we cannot consult it in the

* The writer regrets that owing to absence on naval service, he has been unable to write up these notes more fully. He is much indebted to the Editor for his help in checking the footnotes.

† *Transactions*, o.s. i, 98.

‡ *Transactions*, n.s. ix, 220; n.s. xxvi, 225; V.C.H., II, 152.

§ V.C.H., *Cumberland*, II, 244.

|| W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (ed. Caley, Bandinel and Ellis) VI.

¶ V.C.H., II, 152.

** *Ibid.*

original MS. of the cartulary which is now lost without trace. (The writer of the transcript tells us that in 1774 the MS. was among the possessions of the Earl of Carlisle at Naworth Castle; needless to say, the writer and many others would welcome any news of its later history or present whereabouts). By analogy with other such entries it is probable that this note was a later insertion* whose authority must not be accorded the same degree of confidence as that of the less informative charter.

Before seeking to establish the significance of this entry it is important to emphasise that the dedication (to which it refers) cannot be taken as identical with the foundation. This assumption has been made in the past and leads inevitably to erroneous conclusions.

The *foundation* of a medieval monastery was a long and complicated process, comprising not only the choice of a convent of religious and the provision of a site for the new house, but a series of legal transactions to secure adequate endowment for the new house which might involve a number of feudal lords and ecclesiastical dignitaries. The founder might confirm early steps by intermediate charters, conveying only the site of the convent or part of his ultimate endowments, and in any case would generally sum up his efforts in an omnibus charter which might be drawn up some few years after he had taken the first steps to found his monastery or when the community had already been in existence for some time.† It was clearly impossible to assign a neat and accurate date to so involved a process, and medieval writers recording such foundations therefore show a rather misleading precision; nor can one even always determine to what stage in proceedings they applied the date of foundation,

* If the original note, like the transcript of it, had Arabic numerals, this would be proof of its late date, such being rarely found in English MSS. before the late 15th century.

† See V. H. Galbraith *English foundation charters of the eleventh and twelfth centuries* in *Camb. Hist. Journal*, 1938.

some for example, referring to the first efforts others to later stages of the proceedings.

The *dedication* on the other hand was a short and datable act, the ceremony at which proceedings were sufficiently advanced for the altars to be hallowed for Divine service. This might come at the end of a long and expensive period of building activity, therefore long after the foundation, as a few examples from contemporary Augustinian houses show. Thus 1176 saw the dedication of the abbey of Cirencester where regular canons had first been installed in 1131 and Dunstable priory, founded about 1132, dedicated its conventual church in 1213. But at St. Botolph's, Colchester, the Augustinian Rule was introduced about 1100 and their church dedicated in 1106, this being probably a temporary structure replaced by the present building in the course of the twelfth century. Thus it is clear that the dedication is quite distinct from the foundation of a medieval monastery, and took place at a varying interval of time after steps had been taken to establish a new house of religion.

The confusion between the two terms is common enough but seems to be entirely modern, so that it is reasonable to suppose that the cartulary note—contrary to what is generally believed—does not give us the date at which the foundation of the priory of Lanercost began, but the time at which its buildings were dedicated.

But even here there are more qualifications to be made. It has long been obvious that the note is contradictory, since Bishop Bernard though he did undoubtedly exist (*pace* Ferguson) was probably not bishop of Carlisle before the opening years of the thirteenth century.

If we rely on the opening statement and take the dedication as occurring in 1169 we shall have to place the actual foundation some few years earlier—a conclusion from general grounds, which as we have seen, is supported by the evidence of the so called foundation charter. For

the canons to be safely installed there by 1169 implies some little effort in previous years (specially since there seems to have been no previous church there) and would make it appear likely that Robert de Vaux started the planning of his new monastery very soon after he acquired the Gilsland estates about 1165. We should perhaps therefore place the beginnings of Lanercost a few years earlier than is usually done, say c. 1166.

Such a view is I think very likely, but it is not beyond challenge. It allows little time for the erection of buildings and ignores the plain statement that the church was dedicated by Bishop Bernard. Temporary buildings could of course have been erected by 1169, but we know from the existing architectural remains that the stone church progressed slowly and was not completed until well into the thirteenth century. If the dedication was delayed until progress with the new stone church was well advanced, it is by no means impossible that this should have taken place in the time of Bishop Bernard. His dates are very shadowy; he succeeded in 1189 according to Prescott, in 1204 according to V.C.H.* When the present church was completed is not known, though it was probably round about the end of the first quarter of the thirteenth century, a date rather later than Bernard's time. But dedication applied to the altars and had no rigid connection with building activities, so it is by no means outside the bounds of possibility that the cartulary note refers to a ceremony which in fact took place in Bernard's time. It is arguable that tradition was less likely to falsify the name of the bishop who officiated at the dedication of the church (especially of so obscure a one as Bernard) than the date of the ceremony. Whilst it is perhaps worth noting that if the dedication did take

* *The Register of Wetherhal*, ed. J. E. Prescott, Carlisle, 1897, pp. 47 and 497-498; *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. F. M. Powicke (1940) gives 1189 (p. 180). V.C.H., II, 14, 21-2.

place in 1169 it could not have been undertaken by the diocesan, for the see of Carlisle was vacant at the time.*

The evidence is not I think sufficient to enable us to choose between these two alternative dates for the dedication of Lanercost priory. Both I think have an arguable case and can claim the support of half the cartulary note on which we are so largely bound to rely. It is, however, clear that the note does not refer to the foundation of the priory which probably took place (from the evidence of the founder's charter) soon after Robert de Vaux acquired the Gilsland estate in or about 1165.

A final point is worthy of consideration. Where did the first canons of Lanercost come from? The filiations of the large majority of English Augustinian houses are unknown and likely to remain so, but in this case, if we cannot be certain we can make a likely guess. It has not hitherto been noted that of all Augustinian houses founded in this country at this time Lanercost and Pentney in Norfolk alone were dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, and that both of these were founded by members of the de Vaux family. Now when a new Augustinian house was founded, it was not unusual to draw canons from a house on the patronage of the founder's family and for the daughter house to assume the dedication of the parent. As both these customs may be reflected here it is very probable that the first regular canons of Lanercost were drawn from Pentney. It is true that the date of Pentney's establishment is uncertain but Brinkburn priory, founded late in the reign of Henry I or early in that of Stephen, was almost certainly colonised from the Norfolk house which later claimed control over it and possessed some of its archives.† Thus Pentney was clearly founded in the early half of the twelfth century and would be in a position to send canons to Lanercost in the time of Robert de Vaux.

* Prescott, *op. cit.* pp. 493-503. V.C.H. II, 19.

† *Brinkburn Cartulary* (Surtees Soc., 1892), pp. 184-185.