

65.06 The documented monastic house

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The settlement of another dispute provides the earliest known documentary reference to the priory site itself. In c 1220 the bishop of Lincoln agreed to grant a licence to Fontevrault Abbey for an oratory, a cemetery and sepulture (the right of burial) 'within the bounds of their court at Grava', saving the rights of the church of Leighton. It should be remembered that at this time the only right of burial and the only cemetery for the whole of Leighton Buzzard parish, including all the townships, was at All Saints church in Leighton Buzzard. Any other cemetery in the parish, as the prior desired, would have been opposed by the mother church because of the potential loss of burial dues and other rights. As a dispute had arisen, burial was probably already taking place at La Grava before the agreement which, effectively, was probably a regularisation of this activity. However, despite his bishop's settlement, the rector of Leighton remained unhappy at his loss of rights and dues for, in 1242, another dispute between him and Fontevrault was resolved. The rector had again raised the issue of the cemetery and right of burial, and claimed that Fontevrault owed him tithes from certain (demesne?) lands. He also believed the chapel at La Grava, used for 'divine celebration', to be prejudicial to his parochial interests and to those of Leighton church, complaining that the abbess of Fontevrault had built a chapel 'in her court at Grava in the parish of Leighton ... which chapel should be demolished'. The rector failed with all his claims and, in effect, the licence of c 1220 was confirmed (Lincoln Record Society, 29, 1935, 4-9) [see 8 and 67.10].

A further reference to the chapel recorded in the Roll of the Justices in Eyre at Bedford in 1227 usefully provides its dedication: the value (3s) of a dead man's horse and cart (from which he had fallen) is given as a deodand by the justices to the chapel of St John de Grava in Leighton (Fowler 1916, 142). This is particularly useful since it indicates that La Grava Priory was for men only. The mother house at Fontevrault was a double order of men and women who followed the Benedictine rule under an abbess. In Fontevrault itself the female side was dedicated to St Mary and the male side to St John the Evangelist, as in an 1199 reference to the mother house at Fontevrault: '... towards the building of the houses of the brethren of St John the evangelist at Fontevrault' (Calendar of Documents in France, 918-1206, 392-3).

The male association with La Grava is made even clearer in the English documents as only brethren are mentioned, particularly in several 13th-century documents concerning grants of land to the priory. Confusingly, however, the dedication of the mother house is also used. A typical translated wording is: 'Grant to the brethren of the order of St Mary, Fontevrault, dwelling at Grove in the parish of Leighton' (Catalogue of Ancient Deeds, III, 1900, 420-1, 444, 542; Calendar of Close Rolls, 1259-61, 212; Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1272-81, 461).

The brethren served under a prior, at least five or six of whom are named individuals in the documents:

Vitalis 1196

William 1227, 1230

Nicholas 1244-53, 1256-58, 1263

William de Verney 1268

William 1283, 1287, 1289 (could be the same William as either that previous or succeeding)

William de Lyencurt 1295, 1297

More usually the prior is referred to only as the prior of Lecton (Leighton) from 1194 to 1240 (Pipe Roll Society, 14, 1194-95, 41; Calendar of Liberate Rolls, 1226-40, 500) and as the prior of La Grava from 1242 to 1297 (Calendar of Liberate Rolls, 1240-45, 157; Calendar of Chancery Rolls, 1277-1326, 22, 41; Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1292-1301, 263). This 'sudden' change of name is interesting but it is uncertain as to whether it is of any more significance than simply the prior at last taking the name of the place where the priory actually was, La Grava (later Grovebury), rather than retaining the Leighton name inherited from the manor of Leighton, the original endowment on which it was established, and for which it was now the administrative focus. Oddly, the change of name occurs some time after the priory site is documented as Grava, possibly at least from 1195 and certainly from c 1220 (Mawer and Stenton 1926, 130; Lincoln Record Society, 29, 1935, 5-6) [67.07, 67.09, 67.10].

The last certain known reference to a prior of La Grava in Leighton occurs in 1297 - William de Lyencurt, also Proctor General in England of the Abbess of Fontevrault (Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward I, III, 1292-1301, 263). This itself is a reminder that the various priors of La Grava or Leighton are often documented as representing the abbess in England nationally and sometimes the pope, despite candidates at its other monastic houses in the country. At the same time as William was prior, a John de Lyencurt from La Grava was ordained a subdeacon by the bishop of Lincoln (Lincoln Record Society, 69, 68, 72).

Although the documents make no suggestion of monastic activity at La Grava in the 14th century, three references must be highlighted. One in 1333 mentions Richard de Greneburgh, Prior of Grave, but provides no further locational details for the latter (Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1330-34, 438). The same Richard is stated in 1337 to be the proctor of the abbess of Fontevrault (Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1334-38, 483). A further reference in bailiffs accounts of 1341/42 to the 'Prior's stable' at the La Grava site is also intriguing (Richmond 1924, 30).