

65.07 La Grava Priory and royalty

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Fontevrault's largest religious house in England was Amesbury Priory in Wiltshire which it took over in 1176–77 after the previous Order was removed (VCH Wiltshire, II, 1955, 247; Calendar of Documents Preserved in France, 918–1206, 378–9, 384). Fontevrault's close association with the English monarchy is demonstrated by Henry II's interment there with his wife, by the annual gifts of money to it throughout the 13th century, by the burial of Henry III's heart at Fontevrault in 1292, and by his wife, Eleanor of Provence, becoming a nun at Amesbury Priory in 1285 shortly after her granddaughter, Mary of Woodstock, one of Edward I's daughters (Richmond 1928, 17; Green 1850, 404–42; Byerly and Byerly (eds) 1986, xvii, 370–3). The Fontevrault connection meant both kings maintained an interest in La Grava and the manor of Leighton Buzzard in the latter half of La Grava's monastic period. Entries dated at Leighton Buzzard in the Fine, Close and Patent Rolls show that they were in the parish for a day or two at a time in 1264, 1275, 1280, 1290 and 1300 [67.10, 67.11]. Whether they actually stayed at La Grava or in Leighton Buzzard (the use of the two names in the documents of the time was often interchangeable), or elsewhere, is uncertain from the documents. Although La Grava was the manorial focus and certainly an occasional royal residence in the early 14th century, an unrecorded place of residence may also have been maintained in the town itself. In 1290 whilst Edward I is recorded as signing writs in Leighton Buzzard on 1 and 2 August and the Court of King's Bench was held at Leighton on 2 August, the Chancellor, the bishop of Bath and Wells, was definitely at La Grava on 31 July (Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1281–92, 379–80; Calendar of Close Rolls, 1288–96, 141; Selden Society, 74, 1955, lii). In June 1307 two tuns of wine were ordered to be sent to Leighton Buzzard for the use of Queen Margaret, the king's consort; others were to be sent to other places nearby on her itinerary (Calendar of Close Rolls, 1302–07, 503) [67.11, 67.12].

The calendared rolls indicate that when La Grava or Leighton Buzzard were visited they were usually the last or first stopping point for the royal court before or after a stay at Kings Langley in Hertfordshire, one of the main royal residences only about 28km to the south-east. It would have been necessary for a place of residence for a great royal entourage to be of sufficient scale and quality to accommodate them but the documents throw little light on whether La Grava was adequate or was made to be adequate. It is clear, however, that La Grava did not suffer the poverty that the mother house in Fontevrault and Amesbury Priory faced in the late 13th century (Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1281–92, 462). Entries in the Liberate Rolls for 1252–72 indicate that Henry III owed much money to Fontevrault as he had not kept up previously regular payments. Although the king attempted to raise the money, it seems that Fontevrault was lacking in some of its expected income in the second half of the 13th century which perhaps was partly responsible for this poverty (Calendars of Liberate Rolls, 1245–72) [67.11].