THE RELIGIOUS HOUSES OF WEST MIDDLESEX

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[This paper was read at a meeting of the Ealing branch of the Historical Association and is printed here with the kind permission of the Council of the Association.]

THE Ordnance Survey has recently published a Monastic Map of England, Wales and Scotland. A mere glance reveals an uneven distribution in England. Of the larger counties Lincoln, besides having its own order of Gilbertines, is covered with names; and so is the eastern half of Yorkshire. It will be remembered that these two counties were the mainstay of the Pilgrimage of Grace soon after the dissolution. On the other hand there are wide empty spaces in Cornwall and Lancashire; and Devonshire is a contrast to saintly Somerset and to Gloucestershire. Among the smaller counties Rutland had no settlement of any importance; but Huntingdonshire found room for large houses at Sawtry, St. Neots and elsewhere in addition to the great abbey of Ramsey. In the adjacent shire of Bedford there were many secondary houses in addition to Dunstable, Woburn and Warden. There are other local anomalies. In the village of Coxwold in Yorkshire the great Cistercian abbey of Byland had a neighbour in the Black Canons of Newburgh Priory; and three of the most important houses for the reception of noble ladies, Shaftesbury, Wilton and Amesbury, were strung in a line at intervals of ten miles or so, with Lacock not so very far away.

It is possible to detect two tendencies. With the exception of the most claustral orders, such as the Cistercians, who sought to subdue the body by wilderness winning at Fountains and Furness, the monastic orders, the Benedictines and Cluniacs, and still more markedly the canons of St. Augustine, were not averse to contact with the laity; and of course the friars could only find their vocation in urban surroundings.

The second tendency was for the east side of the country and especially the shires adjacent to the great roads to York to develop rapidly in the centuries following the conquest. In the south, Canterbury and Winchester were great cities even at an earlier date. The result of these two trends was that the

Monastic Map shows a concentration of settlements in the east and the south-east of the country.

In Middlesex there were special circumstances which counterbalanced this tendency outside London and Westminster. The chief landowners, St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey, had no motive for founding religious houses; and there were no powerful feudal families in the county, like the Beauchamps and the Clares, whose elderly members were anxious to effect a celestial insurance by works of piety.

Until, all out of time, Syon sprang into existence as a great abbey from its very beginning, the religious houses in this county were not numerous and most of them were very small. Priories in England ranged from princely Lewes through wealthy Merton down to houses to which an alien abbot had sent a few monks with a chaplain and prior (perhaps foreman would be a fair translation) to look after his interests. It was to this class that several houses belonged.

Alphabetical order is as good as any; and it will have the advantage of ending with Syon.

Bentley priory will be familiar to those who use the Wealdstone road to Watford and St. Albans. It is on the edge of the county and on the boundary between Harrow and Stanmore. Little is known of its history. It was an Augustinian house built in honour of St. Mary Magdalene. A trivial incident in 1248 is told by no less a historian than Matthew Paris. The prior and several of his brethren were reckoning the value of a wheat mow when their calculations were ended by the collapse of the mow. The prior, who was of slender build, was suffocated; his companions were thrown down but escaped injury. Five years later the king pardoned the new prior, who may have succeeded to an encumbered estate, the interest on a loan of £3 from Moses and Isaac, sons of Jacob Crispin; and instructions in accordance were sent to the justices for the custody of the Jews. On 12th June, 1306, Edward I sealed some letters patent at the priory on his way between Harrow and Watford.

The Harrow manor rolls of 1512 give some information as to its later history. An archbishop in times beyond the memory of the jurors gave it with its lands to St. Gregory's priory, Canterbury. The latter house used to find a priest to celebrate mass and other offices at Bentley every week, who used to be called the prior of Bentley; but Thomas Wells, then prior

of St. Gregory, had not presented any canon to Bentley for 20 years or found a prior for the past two years.

This was in accordance with the settled policy of the Augustinians long before the time of Thomas Cromwell to merge their weak houses in stronger communities; and some time before 26 Henry VIII Bentley had been transferred with its possessions at Wotton Underwood, including the church there, to St. Gregory's; and at the suppression of the larger monasteries it passed into the hands of the king with the other possessions of that priory.

We now pass to the predominant letter in Middlesex topography. The accounts given by Dugdale and Tanner as to the early history of Hampton must be discredited. It is unlikely that the prior of the hospital of St. John of Jerusalem ever had a small sisterhood there which came to an end when Minchin Buckland in Somersetshire was established by Henry II in 1180 on condition that all the ladies of the Hospital should be transferred to it. It is probable that the prior had some serving sisters (including Joan de Hampton) attached to this preceptory, who with others from elsewhere formed the nucleus of the Buckland establishment in accordance with the king's directions. It was, in fact, a normal though small preceptory founded before 1180. It was endowed by Jane, widow of Sir Robert Grey, with the manor of Hampton before 1312, when the donor died. A few years earlier Walter de Wyke and Maud his wife gave lands in Wick; and the preceptory also had possessions in Kingston.

The prior in England referred to this house in a report to the Grand Master of the Order in 1338. There was a *camera* (probably on the site of Hampton Court), a garden, a dovecote and 1,000 acres of land and 2,000 sheep. Besides the Knight Hospitaller in charge there was a royal pensioner, a chaplain and some others. The community had to maintain Hampton weir, to provide the chaplain's salary, a robe for the knight and clothing and wages for the pensioner, a reaper, doorkeeper, baker and other functionaries. In 1503 it still existed though its numbers were much reduced; for in that year Elizabeth of York went there to pray (in vain) for a happy delivery. She died in childbirth a month later. Its virtual end came in 1514, when it was let to Cardinal Wolsey for 99 years.

Harmondsworth was an alien priory under the Benedictine abbey of St. Katherine on the Hill at Rouen. Dugdale and

Lysons have doubts (which Tanner does not share) whether it was ever anything more than a grange; but the evidence that it was a priory is conclusive.

The land was granted to the abbey at Rouen by William the Conqueror when he became king of the English in a charter which gives evidence of his grim humour. He gave the land called Hermodesedes with the church and its appurtenances at the suggestion of William Fitz Osbern Dapifer and count Palatine in the presence of the abbot and two of his monks. The gift was made by a knife which the king playfully gave the abbot when he seemed to be about to stab his hand. Thus, said he, should land be given. By this testimony and that of many nobles the gift was made in the year 1069.

Hermodesedes sounds a strange spelling; but in 1356 the Roman Curia acknowledged its existence under the name of Hermodes de Worchos.

There are several references to it as a priory in the English records. In 1277 and 1313 its head acted as proctor for his foreign abbot and is called a prior. In 1278 his villeins rioted and the temporal arm had to be invoked. The foreigners may not have been popular in this remote parish, which still keeps a flavour of rusticity. In 1340 it was seized by Edward III with other alien priories; and in 1391 it became part of the endowment of Winchester cathedral, a grant confirmed in the following year by Boniface IX. The great barn mentioned by Lysons and still surviving is probably part of the priory buildings. It measured 191 ft. by 38; it was certainly built before 1387, probably much earlier, and it resembles other Benedictine barns in its workmanship.

The Trinitarian friars at Hounslow had a long and useful career. The order itself is of interest. In 1211, it is said, two solitaries had a dream which sent them to Pope Innocent III, who had also had an oracle or vision. He clad them in a white garment with a blue and white cross, this being the raiment of two messengers whom he had seen in his vision holding two captives by their hands. He gave them a Rule by which to live and bade them collect alms for the redemption of Christian prisoners. Some authorities give them a slightly earlier date of foundation. The Trinitarians themselves scoffed at this papal foundation and claimed that the Holy Trinity, God and not man, was their founder.

Their Rule enjoined on them a threefold use for their revenues,

the maintenance of their house, the relief of the poor and the ransom of prisoners, and their full title was Trinitarian friars for the redemption of captives. Their churches were to be plain and were to be dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Two salutary rules were that they were not to have feather beds and, that if an accuser failed to prove his charge, he was to suffer the penalty the accused would have undergone.

The house at Hounslow must have been a very early foundation, as it received letters of protection from King John in 1214. For a friary it was wealthy. The churches of Littleton and Bedfont were appropriated to it in 1316. Richard king of the Romans gave land at Baber in Isleworth. It had the manor at Bedfont, a market at Hounslow and a fair there on Trinity Sunday and the following day, and land at Worton, Stanwell, Bedfont, Kingston, Harlington and Staines. In 1369 a royal pardon was received for entering a messuage in London bequeathed to the friars by the vicar of Harlington without a mortmain licence. The most distinguished member was probably Robert of Hounslow, who became prior Provincial of the Order in England, Scotland and Ireland in the fifteenth century. The foundation would appear to have kept its reputation but lost its wealth by the beginning of the next century, since in 1507 and 1511 collections were made in the diocese of Winchester (and probably elsewhere) for its support. At the dissolution it was assessed at £74 and annexed to the honour of Hampton Court. In the next reign the site was given to Lord Windsor under the title of Le Fryers.

There may be some who still refer to the parish church of Ruislip as the Priory Church. This is almost certainly wrong. The little alien priory never occupied its site and never had so large a church. It sprang, indeed, from one of the most famous abbeys in France, Bec Hellouin, whose relations with the Norman kingdom had been so intimate that it supplied three of the most famous archbishops of Canterbury, Lanfranc, Anselm and Theobald. The manor and church of Ruislip were given to the abbey by Arnulph de Hesding, who was also a benefactor of Shaftesbury and of several French abbeys, in the reign of William the Conqueror. In the reign of Henry II some monks were sent over from Bec to form a priory. This was followed in a few years time by a similar mission to another possession of the abbot at Ogbourne in Wiltshire; and much of the history of Ruislip has to do with the relation between these two priories.

The prior of Ruislip at first acted as the abbot's attorney and proctor, but was soon supplanted by the west country prior and gradually Ruislip became subordinated to Ogbourne. In the reign of John the Middlesex prior was contesting the right to land at Ardleigh in Essex with the Bovilles and in 4 Henry III he had a grant of Great Blakenham manor in Suffolk; but this had passed into the possession of Ogbourne by 1327. In 1279 there was still so much equality between the two houses that the abbot's tenants at Swincombe were liable to journey to either place to pay their dues. In 1259 the prior of Ruislip engaged in a controversy with the rector of Hayes (then a very large parish) as to tithes, which ended in an ordinance that the rector should keep his tithes but pay an annual pension of eight shillings to the prior. By 1291 the Ecclesiastical Taxation of that year refers to the temporalities of Okeburne in Rouslep and to the appropriation of its church, valued at 25 marks, to the Wiltshire priory. In 1331 the Prior was reduced to such insignificance that he was not named in a dispute between the king and the abbot of Bec, which ended in the abbot's favour, as to the distribution of a fixed daily dole of bread to the poor of the place at the manor. Ruislip priory ceased to have a separate existence when it was seized by Henry IV during the war with France at the beginning of his reign; and the king presented to the parish church in 1400. It was not long before the turn of Ogbourne came. It was suppressed as an alien house in 2 Henry V; and of its possessions in Ruislip, the church passed to the canons of Windsor and the manor was granted to the university of Cambridge in the reign of Henry VI and to King's College in the reign of his successor.

An incidental reference connects the place with Harmondsworth. When Alice Ferrers, the mistress of Edward III, was attainted in 1378, she was found to hold a moiety of the manor of Southcote in Ruislip of various lords including the priors of Harmondsworth and Ogbourne.

Mr. Hugh Braun, in the course of a long article on Ruislip in Vol. VII of the New Series of Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, has given a different account of the origin of the place; but his evidence is based on a document of 1294, when its decline was well under way. He describes it as a cell of Ogbourne from the very beginning, with two monks, of whom the senior was called prior ex officio, with a very small church (*ecclesiola*). He is probably right as

to the church, which he places with the other buildings in the lawn of the Manor Farm, where remains of early masonry have been found. He is almost certainly right in his assertion that the description of the parish church as the Priory Church is due to local patriotism.

I can only set out briefly the points that make Syon Abbey unlike any other English foundation. It was, I believe, the only house in this country of the Bridgetine order. St. Bridget was a Swedish lady of royal blood who followed the Rule of St. Augustine. After her husband's death she practised many austerities, dropping sealing wax on herself to impress on her mind the sufferings of Christ. She made two pilgrimages; and on her return from Rome after the second of them she obtained a confirmation from Urban V of the order she had founded at Wastein in Western Sweden. She died in 1372 at the age of 70 and was canonised in 1391.

By 1415 the golden age for founding abbeys and priories had long ended; but Henry V, unlike Henry VIII, thought that the revenues accruing from a suppression might properly be devoted to like purposes and not almost entirely to the Augmentation of the Revenues of the Crown. One result was the foundation in Twickenham of an abbey for an abbess and 59 other nuns, 13 priests, 4 deacons and 8 lay brethren. This total of 85 was equal to the number of 13 apostles including St. Paul and 72 disciples. The sexes in the convent were completely segregated.

In 1432 it was moved to Isleworth. It was richly endowed, chiefly with the former possessions of alien priories. Besides lands in the counties of Middlesex, Surrey and Essex, there was a wide domain in West Sussex of which the abbess was lady; and she sent her ministers on a Western Circuit which extended from Mere in Wiltshire through Somerset and Devon to St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall. The founder's son in 1444 added lands in Gloucestershire, Kent, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire to her possessions. In a survey made in 5 Henry VII the revenues the abbey amounted to £1,616; and in 1539, when it was surrendered to the crown after an unfavourable report by the commissioners, which took full value from the fact that it was a double house for men and women, its revenue was £1,944 and its clear income £1,731.

This was far from being the end of its history; and here again it differed from other religious houses. In 1557 Queen Mary reincorporated the abbey, and an abbess, 17 sisters and 3

brethren were collected from the dispersal. There was a second dissolution when Elizabeth came to the throne. Some of the nuns went to a house of the order at Dortmund in Germany. After wanderings and perils some returned to England and others went to Rouen, where they had a corporate though troubled existence until the surrender of the city to Henry of Navarre. The community found their way to Lisbon in 1594, where by 1622 they were known as the English nunnery. There were 30 nuns, four brethren and seven serving sisters. After fire and earthquake some 20 occupied a place in that city called Sion House in 1760. In 1809 nine of them with their abbess and director sought refuge in England from the troubles of the Continent. In 1811 they were at Walworth, then at Peckham, then at Somers Town and then in Staffordshire. The Earl of Shrewsbury relieved their poverty and paid their debts. The community never quite lost its corporate life. It had 45 abbesses between 1415 and 1840, when G. J. Augier wrote the history from which I have extracted the foregoing particulars; and it continues to exist.

There is yet another small foundation to be mentioned. A hospital known as Syon Hospital was founded near West Brentford bridge by John Somerset, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the reign of Henry VI. It was a fraternity of the nine orders of angels for two secular priests and seven poor men under the charge of a master. Its revenue was £40 and it was granted to the Earl of Somerset in the first year of Edward VI on the suppression of colleges and chantries. Its endowment included Osterley manor, Wyke by Osterley, and Portpool in London. The priests had 9 marks a year, the poor men 7½d. a week, with fuel and a gown worth 4s. When Glover made his Survey in 1635, no vestige of it remained.

Its settlement close to the great abbey may have been a reminder that in a humble way justification can be achieved by works as well as by faith.