

# LONDON AND GLASTONBURY ABBEY IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

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In the later middle ages Glastonbury Abbey, the wealthiest of English monasteries, had frequent contact with London.<sup>(1)</sup> These connexions arose from the Abbey's position as landlord and the abbot's duties as a tax collector and important figure in the affairs of church and crown. In this essay we consider both the kinds of business it transacted and the significance of its London properties.

Once London had become the centre of the national administration in the early twelfth century, the great barons, bishops and heads of important institutions found it necessary to stay in London for varying periods of time at fairly frequent intervals. This soon encouraged the growth of various private connexions between the city and influential people who established permanent quarters for themselves and their servants in London. Glastonbury had acquired a house in London before 1168, for a grant in April of that year from Pope Alexander III to Abbot Henry de Blois (1126-71) mentions a house there.<sup>(2)</sup> Perhaps Abbot Henry built it for he concerned himself with advancing the power and prestige of his monastery besides having interests in affairs of state and his own ambitions within episcopal politics.<sup>(3)</sup>

Abbots of Glastonbury received summonses to all parliaments and sometimes to the king's council. In addition the abbots acted as tax collectors for the crown, convocation and the provincial chapter of the Black Monks. Many of these duties required the abbot or his representatives and servants to visit London. The routes they followed varied, perhaps according to the season of the year or with the business to be transacted. Two of them can be traced.<sup>(4)</sup> They both passed through manors belonging to the Abbey: the more direct one lay from Glastonbury through Mells in Somerset and then to one of the manors clustered about Chippenham, or to Winterbourne Monkton in Wiltshire, and after this travellers sometimes stopped at Ashbury before making their way to Reading and so to London. The other, favoured by the chamberlain and some other officials, went by the road through Ditchet and Batcombe in Somerset, thence to Longbridge Deverill, Idmiston or Damerham in Wiltshire and so to Winchester and finally to London.

By the fourteenth century there were many connexions between Glastonbury and London. Among the more important of them were financial transactions relating to tax collection and the Abbey's own needs, and the purchase of rare or unusual goods required for the Abbey's religious and domestic uses. Unfortunately very few of the obedientiaries' accounts or abbots' registers have survived to enable us to calculate the volume and value of the business done in London, although the examples available suggest that these were substantial.<sup>(5)</sup> The largeness of the sums of money involved made it convenient for the Abbey to employ agents who usually seem to have been goldsmiths. Their functions resembled those of modern bankers: they accepted deposits of money from clients, arranged loans on behalf of clients and earned interest for themselves by loaning some of the funds left with them for a period of time. The relationship between one abbot of Glastonbury,

Walter de Monington (1342–75), and a goldsmith, John Hiltoft, during the mid-fourteenth century has been explored elsewhere.<sup>(6)</sup> In later years the Abbey acquired property from a goldsmith, and from another it received help in paying for the travelling expenses of Abbot Richard Bere (1494–1525) when he went as a member of the English embassy to congratulate Pope Pius III on his election in 1503.<sup>(7)</sup>

Fish, spices and wax for candles occur most frequently in the obedientiary accounts, although the Abbey bought a great variety of merchandise in London. In 1308, for example, the chamberer purchased for the convent an unspecified quantity of woollen cloth called 'frison' and various spices, and for himself some ointments, shoes, and a medicament, made according to a special prescription, to treat his leg.<sup>(8)</sup> The internal cellarer, the pittance, and the infirmarer sent to London for their fish, spices and even wine until the Dissolution in 1539. These contacts appear to have been unexceptional and suggest that the domestic economy of the Abbey depended for its more exotic items on the overseas trade of London.

In a few accounts we find references to the timing and cost of particular journeys to and from London, though it is impossible to say whether the expenses were typical of their period. The chamberer's accounts of the early fourteenth century show that most of the long trips to London or elsewhere were undertaken in the autumn or winter. Such timing reveals that roads did not necessarily become impassable for half of the year, as some writers have suggested, and that the Abbey took advantage of using the men, carts and animals not needed for agricultural work during most of these seasons. However, a few journeys occurred at other times in the year. One of these journeys made in the spring of 1309 is particularly well documented.<sup>(9)</sup> It took nine days to go to and from London, a distance of 127 miles each way, making an average speed of just over thirty miles a day. Four men with horses and carts were involved in the trip, each man being paid fourpence a day by the Abbey chamberer. From this money the men provided some of the fodder for the horses.

The Abbey not only spent money in the London markets and did business with lawyers and goldsmith bankers, but it looked to London for a small part of its income from real estate. Again we have no information available about the beginnings of these acquisitions of property but by the time of Abbot Walter de Monington (1342–75) the Abbey had at least one house and appurtenances to lease. One lay in the parish of St. Benet Sherehog and Abbot Walter let it to John de Twiford(e) on 27 April 1357 for an annual rent of 20 lbs. of pepper.<sup>(10)</sup> The same rental came to the Abbey at the Dissolution when the price of pepper was 7*d.* or 8*d.* a pound.

In common with most of the great landlords during the last quarter of the fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth century, the Abbey experienced the consequences of a decline in population, particularly reduced demands for land and for agricultural produce, which resulted in diminishing long established revenues. Glastonbury responded by changing its investment policy in an attempt to maintain cash revenues. It appropriated several benefices and obtained houses with land in urban areas whilst decreasing expenditure on agricultural land. Between 1401 and 1455 the Abbey increased considerably its London holdings with the help of grants of property licensed under the Statute of Mortmain.<sup>(11)</sup> In 1401 the abbot paid £22 into the Hanaper for a licence to allow John Carbonell, citizen and goldsmith of London and possibly the current financial agent of the Abbey, to grant to the Abbey in mortmain two messuages situated in the parish of

St. Sepulchre without Newgate.<sup>(12)</sup> The property was in burgage tenure of the king. In return the Abbey undertook to find a lamp to burn daily at High Mass. More substantial properties came by the activities of agents acting on behalf of the Abbey in 1426 and 1427 when it received eleven messuages said to have an annual value of 10 marks.<sup>(13)</sup> These properties all lay in the parish of St. Sepulchre. Finally, in 1455 several Somerset men acting as agents for the Abbey obtained thirteen messuages and seven cottages in the same parish with an annual value of 10 marks.<sup>(14)</sup>

Most, if not all, of the Abbey's holdings at the Dissolution appear in an account of the years 1539–1540 kept for the king's use.<sup>(15)</sup> This shows that the London properties of Glastonbury had a gross annual value of £40 3s. 0d. and 20 lbs. of pepper, this representing about one-and-one-half per cent. of the net Abbey revenues. The main group of properties lay in the parish of St. Sepulchre without Newgate: Smithfield (£16 16s. 8d. per annum), 'Cocklane' (£3 12s. 0d. per annum), 'Cordlane' (16s. 0d. per annum) and 'Hosyerlane' (£13 18s. 0d. per annum). In addition the Abbey owned an inn called 'La Crowne' in Warwick Lane (£5 per annum), and a house in the parish of St. Benet (St. Sitha) Sherehog. There are references to two other Glastonbury holdings in the *Monasticon*: a messuage in 'Cowe Lane' and a hospice of the Abbey in Fleet Street, but the former cannot be identified with certainty and the latter is wrongly ascribed to Glastonbury.<sup>(16)</sup>

This short account of the connexions of Glastonbury Abbey with London indicates the ways in which the metropolis satisfied a variety of the Abbey's needs: exotic foods, wine and fish for its domestic economy, and the substantial financial transactions incumbent upon a great monastery fulfilling its obligations and maintaining its prestige. The question of investment in urban property by great landlords deserves fuller exploration and might well throw light on the changes in sources of income as a reflection of developments of the economy during the later middle ages.

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## NOTES

- 1 See the estimates of the net incomes of the major religious houses in M. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, Cambridge, iii (1959), p. 473.
- 2 *The Great Chartulary of Glastonbury*, edited by Dom Aelred Watkin (Somerset Record Society, Taunton, lix (1947), lxiii (1952), and lxiv (1956), p. 129).
- 3 A useful biographical sketch of Henry de Blois appears in M. D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, Cambridge, 2nd edition (1963), pp. 286–93.
- 4 Particularly valuable for reconstructing parts of the itineraries of travellers to and from the Abbey were some of the manorial account files, Longleat manuscripts (L): 11272 (1300–1), 11271 (1302–3), 11215 (1304–5), 10655 (1312–3), 10656 (1313–4), 10761 (1330–1), 10632 and 10633 (1333–4).

- 5 The most comprehensive collection of obediendaries' accounts (Public Record Office. S.C.6. Henry VIII 3118) survive for the last year of the Abbey's existence, and these formed the basis of an article by Dom Aelred Watkin, 'Glastonbury, 1538-39, as shown by its account rolls' in *The Downside Review*, lxxvii (1949), 437-50. Other accounts of the sixteenth century revealing some parts of the domestic economy of the Abbey and contacts with London are external cellarers' accounts of 1529-30 and 1532-3, (L 10753 and L 10756), a guestmaster's account of 1516-17 (L 10749), a medarer's account of 1536-7 (transcribed and translated by Edmund R. Nevill in *Som. & Dr. N. & Q.*, xii (1912), and a pittancer's account of 1532-3 (P.R.O. S.C.6. Henry VIII 3114). Also see documents in footnotes 7, 8, and 9.
- 6 I. Keil, 'Banker and Customer in the Fourteenth Century' in *The Bankers' Magazine*, cxcviii (1964), 344-5.
- 7 For the property reference see below. The Abbey's receiver of barony income paid £403 12s. 11d. to a banker and a further £243 14s. 1½d. in London to other creditors to meet the expenses of the journey to and from Italy (L 10751).
- 8 L 1276 and also see I. Keil, 'The Chamberer of Glastonbury Abbey in the Fourteenth Century' in *Som. Arch. Soc. P.*, cvii (1963), 79-92.
- 9 L 7353.
- 10 British Museum Manuscript Arundel 2, fo. 31. John de Twiford(e) was probably a cutler who appeared before the mayor's court in 1382 on a charge brought by the goldsmiths as a result of his making gold-covered hafts for the Earl of Buckingham. This case formed part of a long drawn-out dispute between the goldsmiths and the cutlers (*Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda of the City of London, 1381-1412*, edited by A. H. Thomas, Cambridge (1932), 21, 68). Perhaps the same man caused Abbot John Chinnock (1375-1420) to sue him for 'intrusion' in 1415 (*Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda of the City of London, 1413-37*, edited by A. H. Thomas, Cambridge (1943)).
- 11 Without comparative material it is impossible to assess the effectiveness of this policy, though we may note that the Abbey's cash income reached its lowest levels during the 1450s. This was a time when most great landlords suffered from financial difficulties arising from the unsettled state of the country under Lancastrian rule. Although the Abbey attempted to augment its income by exchanges or purchases of property throughout the middle ages, in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries it sought steady sources of money rent incomes from ecclesiastical benefices and urban holdings. See, for example, I. Keil, 'Impropiator and Benefice in the Later Middle Ages' in *Wilts. Arch. M.*, lviii (1963), 351-61. The Abbey also obtained some Bristol properties in the same period (*Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1396-99*, London (1909), 471).
- 12 *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1401-05*, London (1903), 17. Perhaps Carbonell had Somerset connexions for a family of that name held a knight's fee from Glastonbury Abbey in West Bradley as early as 1233. The name recurs in documents of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries (*The Great Charters of Glastonbury*, as in note 2, pp. 204, 205, 209, 304 and 347.). A John Carbonell was appointed to a commission with others in 1381 charged by the king with the duty of arresting the then prior of Glastonbury who was said to be delinquent. The same Carbonell was warden of the Goldsmiths' Company (*Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1377-81*, London (1895) 632, and also see I. Keil, 'Profiles of Some Abbots of Glastonbury' in *The Downside Review*, lxxxi (1963), 356-9). Carbonell represented the ward of Farringdon Without on the Court of Common Council during part of the 1380s. In 1396 he underwrote part of a bond for 400 marks required for three goldsmiths arrested on a charge of murder. He seems to have been active as late as 1421 (*Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1381-1412* (as in note 10), 21, 29, 87, 238; and *ibid.*, 1413-37, (as in note 10), 113).
- 13 In April 1426 the Abbey received licences to alienate in mortmain seven messuages at the hands of Nicholas Auncel, Richard Marchant of Taunton and Walter Portman, worth 4 marks a year. In May of the following year the first named made over a further four messuages valued at 60s. 0d. annually (*Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1422-29*, London (1901), 331 and 477-8).
- 14 Among the grantors were two serjeants-at-law (Richard Choke and William Boef) and two members of the Cammell family named John. Richard Choke was buried at Glastonbury and the Cammells had close connexions with the Abbey—one of the family appears in a list of Glastonbury monks of 1456 (*Somerset Wills, xivth, and xvth centuries*, edited by F. W. Weaver (Somerset Record Society, Taunton, xvi (1901)), *passim*; and *Register of Bishop Bekynton*, edited by H. C. Maxwell-Lyte and M. C. B. Dawes

(Somerset Record Society, Taunton, xlix (1934), 1 (1935)) no. 1645). The licence under the statute of mortmain appears in *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1452–61*, London (1911), 205.

15 P.R.O. S.C.6. Henry VIII 3184.

16 See an unpublished M.A. thesis of the University of London of 1929 by M. B. Honeybourne, *The Extent and Value of the Property in London and Southwark Occupied by the Religious Houses (including the Prebends of St. Paul's and St. Martin's Le-Grand), the Houses of Bishops and Abbots and the Churches and Churchyards before the Dissolution of the Monasteries*, 366–9 and appendix IV, 474.