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**The Foundation of the Abbey of St. Augustine at Bristol**

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# THE FOUNDATION OF THE ABBEY OF ST. AUGUSTINE AT BRISTOL

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THE Rev. J. C. Dickinson<sup>1</sup> is only one of a number of modern writers to give the date of the foundation of St. Augustine's Abbey as 1142, though he differs from the others<sup>2</sup> in giving references for the statement. As the ancient authorities all agreed on 1140 it is of some interest to see how the variation has occurred and at the same time to consider how we are to interpret the rather odd dates given by our sources for the Induction of the Canons and for the Dedication.

Mr Dickinson refers to Fosbroke's *Berkeley MSS.* p. 71, Ricart's *The Maire is Kalendar* p. 22, and Leland's *Itinerary* V. 64. The first of these is a composition almost entirely based on the MS of Smyth's *Lives of the Berkeleys* (not then in print), though the reference in question is stated as 'MS Veel': what it actually says is '. . . began the Abbey when Henry II was only 9 years old'; what Smyth wrote was 'not nine years of age.' Britton, the primary source of most guide-book statements on the point, used Fosbroke and set forth the resulting argument, though he went no farther than 'assuming Mr Smyth's sources of information were authentic, the correct date would be . . . 1142'; Fosbroke did not, so Britton could not, quote Smyth's authorities for 1140.<sup>3</sup>

Ricart says 'In the yere of our Lord God MCxI and in the vij yere of the reign of king Stephyn', a more obvious self-contradiction than Smyth's and a century and a half earlier.

Leland at IV. 104 is quite different: 'An. D. 1148 3 Idus Apr. die videlicet Paschae fundatio monasterii . . . et congregatio

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, Ser. 5, vol. 1 (1951) pp. 71-9.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. H. P. R. Finberg *Gloucestershire* (1955) p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> J. Britton *History and Antiquities of Bristol Cathedral* (1830) p. 5.

fratrum ejusdem.' Smyth similarly in one place (I. 35-36) combined dedication and induction.

Now Smyth had at his command all the then (c. 1620) surviving evidence, which included Abbot Newland's 'Roll', the Abbey 'mortiloge,' and the Red Book of St. Augustine's. The first was originally put together in 5 Henry VII; the side of it which contains Newland's account of the foundation, the establishment of FitzHarding at Berkeley, the celebrations of his anniversary in the Abbey, and a list of the Abbots with dates and places of burial, has been published,<sup>1</sup> though from a copy and not the original. The mortiloge was no doubt the principal source of Newland's information about his predecessors, but has, alas, vanished; Smyth saw it 'penes Decanum Bristollie', but as there is no other post-Reformation reference to it we do not even know whether it was among the Chapter archives or a private possession of the then Dean. The Red Book is the Abbey Cartulary, begun perhaps soon after 1200, with some mid-fifteenth century documents copied onto the usual blank leaves at the beginning.<sup>2</sup> Had Smyth been sufficiently interested in the origins of the Abbey there is little doubt that his intelligence and experience with all types of record would have enabled him to resolve the contradictions in his sources and arrive at an intelligible account of the proceedings; but he was concerned only with the Berkeley family and their estates, so did not even trouble to reconcile the contradictory statements he had copied into his notes.<sup>3</sup>

Newland gives three dates in terms of Stephen's regnal years; Henry and Maud came over to claim their right and inheritance 'in the Vth yere'; after two years of 'discorde and Batalle' Stephen was captured at Lincoln 'the vij yere,' after which the account reads as though the agreement between Stephen and Henry and Henry's accession followed forthwith; and (much further on, in the list of Abbots) Abbot Richard 'was inducte on

<sup>1</sup> *Bristol & Gloucestershire Arch. Soc. Trans.* xiv. The other side lists the Mayors and other officials of Bristol.

<sup>2</sup> Hist. MSS. Commission Appendix to 4th Report (1874) p. 364.

<sup>3</sup> Smyth, *Lives of the Berkeleys*, I, 35-6 and I, 42.

Esterday and xj day of Aprile in the yere of our Lord M.C. xlviiij. And the xj yere of the Regne of King Stevyn.' As Stephen's reign officially began on 22 December 1135, for our purposes it is immaterial whether these years are proper regnal years or not; they must correspond to 1140, 1142, and 1146. The first presumably refers to Henry's first visit, which began at the end of 1142; Lincoln was fought in 1141; the last is undoubtedly 1148, for it is an odd but inescapable fact that Easter Sunday fell on April 11th in 1148, and not again until 1221, while the only previous occurrence since 1066 had been in 1137. So it seems reasonable to say that Newland's regnal years are guesses better ignored, and Ricart's equation of 1140 with 7 Stephen in my opinion is an error of precisely the same type.

Indeed, we may remind ourselves that Newland and Ricart were contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> What was the source of Newland's list of Mayors, Sheriffs and Bailiffs, if not the one put together by the industrious Town Clerk Ricart? (It will be interesting to compare them if ever that side of Newland's Roll becomes accessible). And what more likely than that the Town Clerk should have confirmed with the Abbot that his Abbey had been founded in 1140? Whether their efforts at providing regnal years were joint or separate, the Abbey's archives were the only possible source of either original or early information about its beginnings; neither Bristol nor Berkeley records went back so far.<sup>2</sup> (As Newland's MS was practically complete by 1490, collaboration between the two would not have been prevented by the great quarrel between Abbey and Town which broke out shortly after that date; though it is quite possible that their researches provided much of the legal ammunition used in the course of the controversy.)

We are left with Newland's detailed statements about Foundation, Induction, and Dedication, and one of the sources

<sup>1</sup> Newland was Abbot from 1481 to 1515; Ricart died or retired from his Clerkship in 1503.

<sup>2</sup> That the mysterious Fraternity of Kalendars had possessed even earlier Bristol records is not impossible, but if so these had already perished in a mysterious fire.

from which he must have derived them, the Red Book. Newland says:<sup>1</sup> 'This goode lorde primere fundatour and Chanon of the Monastery of Seint Augustines bi Bristowe<sup>2</sup> began the fundacion of the same in the yere of our Lord M.C.xl. And bilded the church And all othir howses of offices according to the same bi the space of vj yerres. And so after in the yere of our Lord M.C.xlvj Robertus Bisshope of Worceter Boniface Bisshope of Exeter Nicholas Bisshope of Landef And Gregorie Bisshope of Seint Asse dedicate the church of the saide Monastery. And then after Alured Bisshope of Worceter inducte vj chanons of the Monastery of Wigmore gederid And chosen by Sir Robert fiz Herding our Fundatour in to our church and Monastery aforesaide on the Ester day whiche was that yere the xj day of Aprile And in the yere of our lord M.C. xlviij.'

This statement is so remarkable that it is vastly surprising that it did not provoke both comment and investigation long ago: dedication of the church a mere six years after the first beginning of the foundation; names of bishops which do not correspond with those of the holders of the sees at any time in their history; and the most peculiar order of events by which what are evidently intended to be the first six canons arrive two years after the dedication of the church.

But when we examine the Red Book one of the first things we come across, on one of the pages left blank when the cartulary was first begun, is a brief note of the same three events: foundation 1140 'in festo Paschali,' dedication in 1146 by the four bishops (but only their initials given—'R. Wigorn. ep.' and so on), induction in 1148. The fact that this memorandum is in a late hand<sup>3</sup> would not have struck students like Fosbroke or Seyer; for them it was another original source, and amply confirmed Newland's account.

<sup>1</sup> *B. & G.A.S. loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> 'Bi Bristowe' is, I fancy, a modification of Newland's first version; 'by' or 'near' was inserted in the title as part of the quarrel referred to above, no doubt as a sort of repudiation of the town's claims to jurisdiction over the adjacent property.

<sup>3</sup> My informant on this point, some years ago, thought it might even have been Smyth's, but had no opportunity to make the comparison.

I cannot explain the 'in festo Paschali' attached to 1140 except as probably having slipped across from the 1146 entry. But the other two are somebody's notes from the evidence contained in the charters in the body of the book. At fo. 34 is a confirmation by Maurice, eldest son of Robert fitz Harding, of the gift 'quod ego in dedicacionem ecclesie sancti Augustini de Bristou in dotem dedi' and it contains these words: 'Hec vero terra ex mea parte oblata fuit super altare sancti Augustini in dedicacionem ipsius ecclesie coram dominis R. Wigorn.. Episcopo et B. Exon. Episcopo et N. Land. Episcopo et G. Episcopo sancti Asaph' qui predictam ecclesiam dedicaverunt.' Again, on fo. 36 is a charter of Nicholas fitz Robert fitz Harding concerning the church of Tickenham, which says: 'Insuper etiam meam concessionem et donationem manu mea posui super altare sancti Augustini coram Aluredo Wigorn' Episcopo presente toto conventu et populo qui ea die convenerat qua novam suam ecclesiam Canonici ingressi sunt.'

Here then is contemporary evidence, of a type which there can be no reason whatsoever to suspect; the insertion of the information into the charters was for the eminently rational purpose of adding unimpeachable dates and witnesses to the gifts they recorded. At the time, of course, the dating thus provided was precise; it is only because other records have failed to survive the eight intervening centuries that we are still left groping, though over a much reduced span of years.

Alured, fortunately for us, was Bishop of Worcester for only two years, 1158-1160. But the important thing in this case is the wording 'on that day on which the Canons entered their new church,' which evidently refers, not to the original induction of the Canons, but to the opening of the monastery church<sup>1</sup>; it was ready for use though not for the final dedication of the whole. Newland's service-books or other records would have given him Easter Day, 11th April, 1148, to be commemorated in connection with the Induction of the Canons into the Abbey;

<sup>1</sup> Mr Dickinson, *loc. cit.* p. 77, took the same phrase in another charter inspected in 1318 as probably referring to the dedication.

in one of his careless moments he identified that event with the one recorded in this charter and so produced Bishop Alured (when he should have said Simon). Even when he found himself writing, 'And bilded the church And all other howses of offices . . . bi the space of vj yeres' Newland, though a builder on a considerable scale himself, does not seem to have blenched, nor did he now when introducing the first Canons into the monastery two years *after* the completion and dedication of the church.

The facts that (a) none of the names of the four dedicating bishops would fit any of the others at any time and (b) the note in the Red Book gave only initials had already led us to the deduction that Newland had invented names to fit the initials before 1936, when Canon (now Canon Emeritus) M. H. FitzGerald published *The Story of Bristol Cathedral*. The initials fit well enough: Roger of Worcester, Bartholomew of Exeter, Nicholas of Llandaff, and Godfrey of St. Asaph must be the bishops of the dedication; the text of the charter confirms the deduction about Newland's imaginative reconstruction but gives us no further help. By 1936 we had also re-discovered (Seyer had done it more than a century before, though only after the publication of his *Memoirs of Bristol*, and saw what it involved, as his notes show) the certificate of Bartholomew of Exeter which establishes a date by the phrase 'on the day whereon our venerable brother Roger, Bishop of Worcester, and ourselves dedicated the church of St. Augustine of Bristol.'<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Alured, all these bishops had lengthy, and contemporaneous, episcopates: Roger 1164 to 1179, Bartholomew 1161 or 1162 to 1183, Nicholas 1149 to 1183, and Godfrey 1160 to 1175. That the last deserted his see in 1165 during the Welsh rebellion of that year is immaterial: Henry II in 1166 issued a writ in favour of 'Godefrido Episcopo cui commendavi Abbatiam' (of Abingdon), and he evidently remained in favour and exercised his episcopal functions during at least the earlier part

<sup>1</sup> Document then in Bristol Museum, now in the City Archives. Seyer's notes are in the Central Library, Bristol. The peculiar deductions from the certificate made by the Rev. Potto Hicks are in *B. & G. A. S.*, LV (1934).

of the Becket controversy; how much notice was taken of his suspension by the Pope in November 1170 we cannot be sure, but it was not until the Synod of Westminster on 18 May 1175 enjoined him to reside in his diocese that he was faced with a definite choice and preferred to resign.<sup>1</sup>

Our missal,<sup>2</sup> alas, no longer has its calendar; but from the lists of important feasts in the Computa<sup>3</sup> it appears that the Dedication fell between the feasts of St. Augustine of Hippo on August 28th and of the Nativity of the B.V.M. on September 8th. Roger of Worcester is not very likely to have been booked for the event before his consecration on 23rd August 1164, so that is hardly a probable year. Indeed, the fact that the witnesses to Bartholomew's certificate are a mixture of Exeter and Worcester ecclesiastics supports the natural idea that that certificate was written in Bristol at the time of the Dedication; in which case the appearance as a witness of Simon, Archdeacon of Worcester, dates certificate and Dedication to 1167 or later. As Bishop Roger was abroad in 1167 and 1171, the possible years seem to be 1168, 1169, 1170, 1172, 1173, and 1174. Someone with access to, and a more detailed knowledge of, the records of the period may be able to limit the choice more narrowly.

At least we now seem to have a more credible picture of the proceedings: Foundation 1140; Induction of the first Canons on Easter Day, 11th April, 1148; opening of church (*ingressus nove ecclesie*) by Alured, Bishop of Worcester, 1158-1160; Dedication of the completed church by the four Bishops 1168-1174.

#### NOTE

Henry II cannot have been present at the Dedication, as he was across the Channel at that season in each of the possible years. But he took part in some sort of ceremony in the Abbey

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eyton, *Court, Household & Itinerary of Henry II*, pp. 88-9, III, 143-4, 190.

<sup>2</sup> Now in Bristol Central Library.

<sup>3</sup> v. Beachcroft & Sabin, *Two Computus Rolls of St Augustine's Abbey* (Bristol Record Soc. IX. 1938).

at some time before the death of Robert FitzHarding on the Nones of February 1170-71, as the following extracts show. Perhaps this was on the occasion of the 'ingressus nove ecclesie'; Henry's presence might well be the reason why the charters make special reference to that event.

- (a) When Henry was only 'Dux Norm' et Aquitan' et comes Andegav' he granted the royal manor of Ashelworth to the Abbey, making it clear that it was previously attached to Berkeley.<sup>1</sup>
- (b) The confirmation of his gifts by Henry as King which appears in the Charter Rolls<sup>2</sup> goes out of its way to mention Ashelworth first of all with the phrase 'donec illam optuli in elemosinam perpetuam super altare sancti Augustini de Brist'.
- (c) A charter of FitzHarding's<sup>3</sup> says 'dedi . . . canonicis sancti Augustini quorum per gratiam Dei et auxilium Domini mei Regis ecclesiam fundavi Almodesburiam Horefeldam et Esselwrtham quam et ipse rex manu sua super altare sancti Augustini posuit.'

Evidently Henry could not afford a fresh gift just then, or thought the Canons were sufficiently well-to-do.

<sup>1</sup> Red Book, fo. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Inspeximus of 11 Edw. II, Cal. Charter Rolls 6 March 1318. Also in Dugdale Monasticon. Red Book, fo. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Red Book, fo. 34. FitzHarding could say 'dedi' because Ashelworth, though quite separate, had always been 'membrum de Berchelai,' which Henry had given him; but he could not give away a Royal manor 'in perpetuum elemosinam' without Henry's permission, so Henry was also a donor.