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**The Abbey of St. Mary, Cirencester**

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## THE ABBEY OF ST MARY, CIRENCESTER

In April 1959 the opportunity occurred for a very limited trial excavation on the site of St Mary's Abbey. By kind permission of the owner, Col. W. A. Chester-Master, a few small trial trenches were cut in one week's work, and later in the same year it was possible to fill in a little of the historical background at the Public Record Office in London, and the Gloucestershire County Record Office. The results of this work form a series of disconnected facts which for the past three years I had hoped to expand by further work in the field and library, but no opportunities have occurred. I thought it best therefore to give the new facts which have emerged as briefly as possible so that they may be on record for incorporation into the full record if and when it is attempted.

The three points with which I want to deal are (1) the excavation, plan, and site of the Abbey; (2) the passage of land tenure from the Church to the Master family; and (3) a few details of the first tenant Roger Basing.

(1) Two interim notes on the site have been published (1), (2)\*, and although an earlier excavation took place to the north of the Abbey house in about 1930 no record of it remains save a few photographs in the Corinium Museum of substantial foundations. The actual site of the Abbey church was warmly disputed in the last century, the main authorities being Fuller (3), Beecham (4), and Baddeley (5), but their arguments are of no more than theoretical interest since the problem cannot be settled from the armchair alone. The aim of the trial trenches dug was to test Beecham's revised plan which he never published, but which he redrew on his personal copy of his book (4) now in the Bingham Library. This, in default of other information, was laid out on the ground, and trial trenches were dug allowing for considerable error for the original measurements of William of Worcester (6), for their drawing out by Beecham, and for our laying out. It did not cause much surprise when all of the six trenches failed to strike any useful remains. In the trenches to the south of the present balustraded fore-court a hard court-yard like surface of mortar and gravel was found at a depth of 3 feet 6 inches. One trench immediately to the north of the fore-court, however, did produce the lower courses of a fine ashlar wall, 2 feet wide, running east-west, with flooring on either side of it of thin oolite blocks measuring 8 inches by 5 inches by  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  inch.

\* For References, see p. 202.

The stratification of the site was uniform showing three layers. The uppermost produced pottery and clay pipes of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the middle layer produced similar remains of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the lower layer which overlay the 'courtyard', wall, and floors, consisted of mortar and rubble in which occurred two pieces of Tudor pottery. The lower layer was rich in fragmentary structural remains. Small pieces of lead came and both stained and painted glass were found, together with fragments of glazed tile, and much moulded stone generally suggesting a date in the later 15th or early 16th century. The fragments of cusped panels, arch mouldings, and capitals, would all fit well on the present Town Hall to the south of the Parish Church, or on the columns of the nave of the church itself.

The only conclusions which can be drawn from this work are the following:—

- (a) On the traditional site of the Abbey there is evidence for the 16th-century destruction of an ornate (?ecclesiastical) building.
- (b) No existing plan is likely to be correct, relying as they all do on insufficient evidence. (N.B.—The 'doorway' (7) in the cellars of the present house is a re-used and extremely battered fragment of a double-headed window. The 14 feet thick wall in the cellars does, however, exist.)
- (c) The site is now proved well worth a large scale future excavation presenting as it does the only site in Cirencester of a medieval building not later seriously disturbed, and also the only site where early (e.g. 9th century) occupation can reasonably be inferred (8).

(2) The most useful part of these notes may well be to correct the printed record as it stands at present in a footnote in Baddeley (5) (p. 229, n. 24) in most unfortunate muddle and confusion. By far the most reliable authority on the Abbey, as on so much else in Cirencester's history, is the Rev. E. A. Fuller, but unfortunately his paper stops, as does the more recent booklet by the Rev. Potto Hicks, at the dissolution (9). The keys to the property transactions lie now among the Abbey Estate papers in the County Record Office at Shire Hall in Gloucester, a source to which the earlier writers did not apparently have access. The leases and copies of some of the grants are among these records, while the grants are in the Public Record Office.

The ownership of the Abbey and the site left the hands of the Church on the morning of 19 December 1539 (10), and was taken into the lands of the crown. Here it remained until the first grant was made

to Thomas Lord Seymour of Sudeley in July 1547 (11). He kept the land until his attainder and execution on 20 March 1549. The ownership now reverted to the crown and in due course was regranted to Sir Anthony Kingston. The original references for this are not entirely satisfactory; I rely on his request for the rents and issues of the Seven Hundreds of Cirencester of the 15 June 1552 (12), followed by his repeated request for the rents and issues, now plus the Liberty of the town, of the 15 September 1552 (13), followed most promptly on the 23 September by a copy of the grant of the site (14). Sir Anthony only enjoyed the site for three years before he died, under suspicion of treason, on 14 April 1556. Confiscation to the Crown presumably followed and there the ownership stayed until the final grant to Richard Master on the 6 June 1564 (15).

Dr Master then found himself in the position where, having bought the land, he had to buy the tenure, which had been following an independent and simpler course. The first lease of the site was granted to Roger Basing for twenty years on the 11 May 1540 (16). He renewed it, before it was due to expire, in February 1546 for a further twenty years for the sum of £48 4s 6d (17). Basing passed the lease on in at least two parts: the one he sold to Thomas Marshall of Poulton on the 6 April 1560 (17); the second he passed to William Chatterton of 'Bradfylles Com. Wilts.', when Chatterton married Basing's daughter, on the 2 December 1565 (17). Master acquired the part lease from Marshall on the 12 February 1566, and from Chatterton on the 28 May 1569 (17). The tenure and ownership, reunited after thirty years, have passed in direct descent in the Master and Chester-Master family until the present.

(3) Roger Basing, who received the first lease of the site and farm of the Abbey, is a character about whom much could be said. He was an extremely important person in the history of the Abbey since the records and evidence of the dissolved monastery were committed to his charge, as were the buildings, whether 'Assigned to Remeyn undefaced' or 'Demed to be superfluous' (10). Although the privilege of guarding the estate was no doubt welcome, the subsequent gift of the lease was extremely embarrassing.

Basing first appears in the public records in 1525 as a wine merchant importing considerable quantities of wine from France (18a). His journeys to and from Bordeaux and Spain made him an ideal agent and he was often carrying official communications between the Emperor and Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey (18b). In 1526 he supplied the King's Gascoyn wine for the Michaelmas quarter, which came to some 118 tuns 1 pipe, or about 30,000 gallons (18c). 1528 was

a bumper year with 38,000 gallons supplied (18d). But Basing was evidently the King's man and not the Cardinal's for Wolsey's fall in 1529 had no effect on his career.

It was Basing's contact with Spain that gave him most trouble; he was in Spain in 1540 on a general trading and fact-finding mission. This, however, misfired and by the 15 August he was writing sadly from prison in Seville. He had been arrested at the suit of a business acquaintance from Bordeaux, and was having a particularly unpleasant time since the plaintiff 'allegeth against me that I am a Lewthyran for by cause the King hath granted me the farm of an Abbey . . . notwithstanding I trust to God to be rydd hence most in then x days' (19a). Another letter (19b) of 9 October repeats the pleas for help, and at last on the 27 November the Privy Council heard of his troubles (19c). The Council duly summoned the Emperor's ambassador who promised the matter his attention (19d). On 26 December 'Mr Mason' was despatched to Spain to deliver a warning note from the King and Council to the Spanish government, that since the Emperor's handling of the King's subjects was so rough and unseemly the Emperor's subjects in England should beware. Mason does not seem to have got very far, although the authorities sent letters to the Queen of Hungary, and to Francis I of France (19e and 19f), which presumably were intercepted on their way out of the country. Mason was arrested half way across France, returned to England and lodged in the Tower. Basing remained in prison.

At last, on the 17 February 1541 the King announced to the Council that he had obtained directions from the Emperor to his officers in Spain to release Basing, and these were immediately forwarded (19g). Basing received these, dated 18 February, on 5 April and unfortunately our record of his Spanish trip ends here. He was back in England in December when he was promoted to the rank of vice-admiral, but he must have had to put up with at least nine months in a Spanish prison. This means that his first visit to his farm and abbey site, whose guardian he legally was, did not take place before the latter part of 1541; it seems reasonable to suggest that his duties were well and truly being carried out by his wife Anne and his household, living presumably in some of the property at this time. This leads to the last source which has any bearing on the buildings of the Abbey (20). It is a petition to the Court of Augmentations for an injunction against Roger Basing and his family and servants, by Sir Anthony Hungerford and Robert Strange who claimed to have bought the 'Church Steplee and surplues houses off the late monasterye'. Their complaint against Basing is that as custodian of the site he

'doo Dayly and wrongfully Interupt + disturbe yower seyde suppluants to have and carye away the Stones Tymber and Stuff of the seyde church Steplee + surplues houses . . . as ys . . . cotrary to all ryght equite and good concyence'. Unfortunately the judgment to this case is lacking so there is no evidence that it ever came before the court or if it did what the judgment was. Finally this parchment has no date, so whereabouts in the story it is to be placed is doubtful. I would favour the year 1541 and suggest as to the occasion the assiduous guardianship of Anne Basing, softened later in the year by Roger Basing on his return with common sense, so that the suit was not pressed. Basing must have left Cirencester fairly soon after this to return to his native Wiltshire, but still remains an interesting Cirencester personality.

I fully realize the deficiencies of these notes, especially in that they fail to fit at present into any larger framework. To those who helped me during their compilation I am very grateful: the staff and assistant keepers at the Public Record Office, to Mr Irvine Gray, County Archivist, and Miss Blanchard and Mr Gaydon of the County Record Office. Mrs Stella Campbell helped considerably over early difficulties with manuscripts, and Mr L. Jackson of the Bingham Library gave me several useful references. On the matter of excavation I am most grateful to Col. W. A. Chester-Master who gave permission for the original work, and to him and Mr Richard Chester-Master for much help and interest since. To my fellow diggers, Messrs P. Broxton, J. Cobb and C. Gasmann, I am especially indebted, as to Mr John Collis, without whose infectious enthusiasm this report might well not have been written. Finally I would like to thank Mr W. I. Croome who gave much help and advice on the planning of the excavation, and in this subsequent work.

RICHARD REECE.

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- (3) Fuller, Rev. E. A., *Trans. BGAS*, vol. 17, p. 45.
- (4) Beecham, K. J., *History of Cirencester* (1886).
- (5) Baddeley, W. St-Clair, *A History of Cirencester* (1924).
- (6) William of Worcester, *Itinerary*.
- (7) Beecham, K. J., *History of Cirencester* (1886), p. 61.
- (8) Ethelweard, *Chronicle*: Book 4, Ch. 3, A.878-80.
- (9) Hicks, Rev. Potto, *The Story of Cirencester Abbey* (1950).
- (10) Public Record Office, E.315, vol. 494.

## NOTES

- (11) P.R.O. E.318/1933.
- (12) P.R.O. E.318/1735.
- (13) P.R.O. E.318/1736.
- (14) Glos. Record Office, D.674 b.T.18.
- (15) Grant in possession of Col. W. A. Chester-Master.
- (16) P.R.O. E.315, vol. 212 f, 130b.
- (17) G.R.O. D.674 b.T.18.
- (18) Letters and Papers of . . . Henry VIII, vol. 4.  
(a) 1136 (13), (b) 1421, (c) 2746, (d) 5082.
- (19) Letters and Papers of . . . Henry VIII, vol. 15 (a) 977.  
Vol. 16 (b) 138, (c) 294, (d) 300, (e) 461, (f) 482, (g) 539.
- (20) P.R.O. E.321, 17/48.