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Some Early Records of Frocester

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Some Early Records of Frocester

By IRVINE E. GRAY, F.S.A.

THE semi-ruinous church of St Peter, Frocester, which in 1849 was almost entirely rebuilt, had for a long time been practically disused. A glebe terrier of 1807¹ states that no regular service was then held in the church, the Sunday duty being regularly performed at a chapel more in the heart of the village. The latter, formerly the private chapel of Frocester Court, and now the parish church of St Andrew, was moved by Lady Brooke in the late 17th century to its present site close to the George Inn and the crossroads round which the modern village clusters. Ordnance and earlier maps give the name St Peter's Street to the road linking the crossroads with the old church, which Bryant's map of 1824 calls St Peter's in the Fields.

Atkins, writing about 1700, describes the church as very ancient, adding that the houses [of the village] formerly stood near it 'but were burnt down, and then, for conveniency of a drier place, were built where they now stand, and the new chapel was built for the conveniency of the parish'. Actually there is little sign of a former village near the church, and it may well be that it was always on the main road for the most part.

The antiquity of St Peter's church, attested by recent excavation which has found vestiges of several successive buildings on the site, is confirmed by such documentary evidence as exists. The cartulary of St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester, which owned the living of Frocester from the early 13th century, contains an agreement in Norman-French dated 18 Jan., 7 Edward II (1313), between the Abbey and Thomas de Berkeley, lord of Coaley, on the subject of intercommoning between Coaley and Frocester.² In this interesting document the bounds of the common pasture shared by the two parishes are described as 'beginning at Lappeleybrugge³ along the highway called Borghullesweye⁴ on the South side, as far as the corner of the hedge of the Banfurlong⁵ against the graveyard of the Old Minster of St Peter on the east side'.

¹ Gloucester City Library, RF.140.4.

² *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae*, ed. W. H. Hart (1863), Vol. 1, pp. 147-9.

³ This bridge was doubtless where the road crosses the brook between Lapley House and Lapley Farm.

⁴ Perhaps OE *Burghildes weg*; evidently an old name of the road from Coaley to St Peter's church.

⁵ 'Furlong or strip where beans were grown' (Ekwall, *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*); a not uncommon field-name.

Now the word minster (*monasterium*) denoted in the Anglo-Saxon period sometimes a monastery but often a group of secular clergy living as a community (later a collegiate church) and serving a sometimes considerable area round. The word was also used of their church and domestic buildings. This was the earliest type of missionary church, established during the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity or soon after; such a church 'of the first foundation' was afterwards, during the Middle Ages, regularly termed an 'old minster' or 'mother church' (*matrix ecclesia*). The parish of Nympsfield, looking down on Frocester from above the Cotswold escarpment, was formerly a chapelry of Frocester, and by an agreement of 1185¹ between Gloucester Abbey and Nicholas Fitz Robert concerning Nympsfield chapel, the chaplain there had to take oath to be faithful to the 'mother church of Frocester'. Nympsfield was given the right of baptism, but the chrism (sacred oil) was to be brought from the mother church. Nympsfield was also to have burial rights (denied to minor churches in early times), but not for burials of men and women holding whole or half virgates of land, i.e. the more substantial parishioners. Earlier still, in 1150, Helyas of Bristol, a canon of Hereford cathedral, was granted the chapel of Nympsfield, *paying the ancient pension to the chaplain of the church of Frocester*. 'In many, perhaps in most cases, the lesser church arose within the original parish of the *matrix ecclesia*, and the memory of its origin was often preserved by a pension from its priest to the rector of the parish from which its territory had been withdrawn'.² It may be added that the significant place-name Nympsfield, derived by Ekwall from British and Old English words meaning 'open land by a holy grove or place', suggests the likelihood that the area may have been a late 'pocket' of paganism, converted eventually by the missionary priests of Frocester from their minster in the Vale below.

Not only Nympsfield, but also the modern parish of Coaley and the tithing of Alkerton in Eastington parish had close links with their neighbour Frocester in the past. An 'Account of Charitable Gifts' in Frocester, 1683,³ states that 'we have time out of minde certeyne lands lyeing within the parish of Cowley . . . held to the use and for reparacons of the Parish Church of Frocester'. The tithe apportionment map for Coaley, 1839, shows considerable remains of Common Fields, of which ten areas, varying in size, are islands within the parish of Frocester. A glebe terrier of 1680⁴ records 'a composition made in former time between the Rector of Eastington and the Vicar of

¹ *Historia et Cartularium*, II, pp. 42-3.

² Sir F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 148.

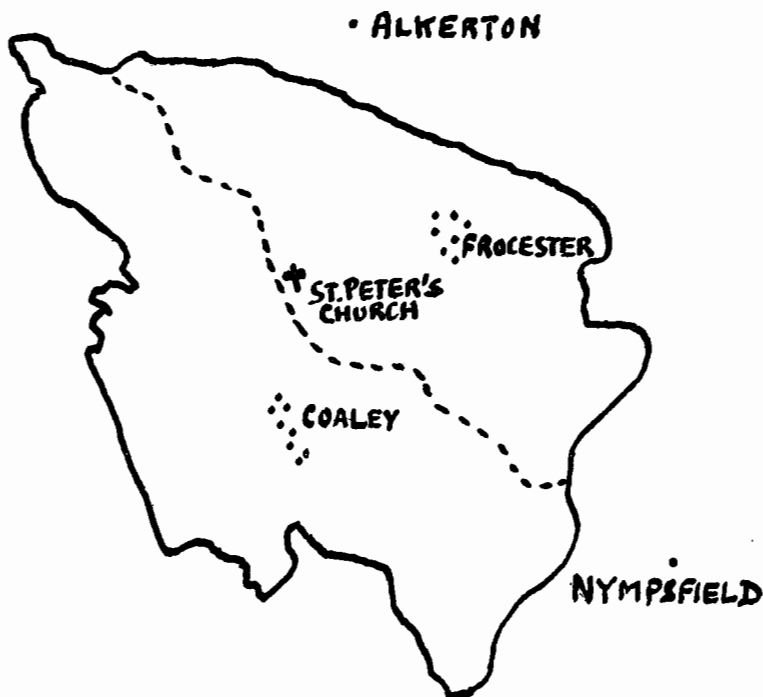
³ Gloucester City Library, RF.140.4.

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Frocester, that the Vicar should receive of the Rector 20 shillings in lieu of tithe due from Allcoton [Alkerton] in Eastington to the Vicar of Frocester'. The liability in question dates certainly from before the original grant of Frocester church to Gloucester Abbey by the Bishop of Worcester, about 1225,¹ which allots the tithes of 'Aucrinton' pertaining to the church of Frocester among other endowments for the perpetual vicarage.

There is thus a strong case for supposing an early Saxon church on the site of St Peter's, Frocester, exerting authority beyond the bounds of the present parish. The church's situation almost on the parish boundary becomes less odd if we consider it as almost in the centre of



the whole area of Frocester and Coaley ; this, combined with the other documents associating the two parishes, suggests that they may once have formed one ecclesiastical sphere. Against this is the fact that Coaley, but not Frocester, is in the Hundred of Berkeley, which is thought to represent the estates of the early Saxon abbey of Berkeley.

¹ *Historia et Cartularium*, II, pp. 231-2.

Although the monks of Gloucester did not acquire the benefice of Frocester until the 13th century, the manor of Frocester was one of their most ancient possessions. The Abbey cartulary relates¹ that *Rabanus anglice Revenswart, insignis frater regis Beornulphi, dedit manerium de Froucestre Deo et ecclesiae Sancti Petri Gloucestriae, tempore clericorum ibidem degentium* (Rabanus, in English called Revenswart, noble brother of King Beornwulf, gave the manor of Frocester to God and the church of St Peter of Gloucester, at the time of the clerics there dwelling). Revenswart ('Raven-black',—possibly a nickname) does not seem to be otherwise known, but Beornwulf, King of Mercia from 823 to 825, was the traditional re-founder of Gloucester Abbey as a college of secular priests (the 'clerics' to whom the cartulary record refers) after the original nunnery, established by Osric in or about the year 681, had fallen into decay. This places the grant of the manor in 823 or soon after. It is likely that the clerics of St Peter's Abbey would have established a church on their new estate, and it may be noted that the dedication of Frocester church was also to St Peter. However, the church may have been there already, possibly founded in the reign of King Offa of Mercia, to whom, some time between the years 772 and 795, Pope Hadrian I granted the possession of monastic properties in his domains. 'We learn from the text that Offa had erected or justly acquired many monasteries and had established and consecrated them all in honour of and in the name of St Peter'.² No minsters could, of course, have been founded in the Severn valley before the conversion of Peada, son of King Penda, in 653, and it is unlikely in fact that there were any foundations much earlier than the creation of the Diocese of Worcester by Archbishop Theodore shortly before 680. Apart from Gloucester (c. 681) the only known early religious establishment in the area is the monastery at Berkeley, of which Tilhere, Bishop of Worcester 777-781, is said to have been abbot.³

The original Saxon occupation of the Severn vale is believed to have followed Ceawlin's victory over the Britons at *Deorham* (Dyrham), recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as in 577. Then and for long afterwards much of the vale must have been thickly forested, as the place-names show.⁴ Little of it, probably, had been cleared in the Roman period, but we can safely conclude that Frocester, on the Roman road leading to the Arlingham crossing of the Severn, was one of these early clearings. Excavation has now shown that the successive

¹ *Historia et Cartularium*, I, p. 77.

² W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (1946), pp. 29-30.

³ Vide C. S. Taylor, 'Gloucestershire in the Eighth Century', in *Trans. BGAS*, xvi, pp. 208-30.

⁴ Cf. G. B. Grundy, *Saxon Charters of Gloucestershire*, pp. 187-8.

churches at Frocester were built on the site of a large Roman building, doubtless a villa. Less than a mile away, near Frocester Court, another Roman villa is being excavated, in a field named Great Stanburgh (the 'Stone Fort').

Finally a word as to the name Frocester. The OE *caester*, applied by the Anglo-Saxons to the remains of Roman towns and villas, is found in only three other Gloucestershire place-names: the major towns of Cirencester and Gloucester, and the very large and important villa of Woodchester. Evidently the Saxons who named Frocester, probably at the end of the 6th century, found there substantial remains of Roman buildings. Even after two centuries or more the visible building stone must have been enough to attract the early church-builders. Frocester, according to Ekwall, is *Frome-caester*, and if this is correct,¹ the *caester* near the River Frome may have been so named to distinguish it from the *Wood-caester* a few miles away.

¹ Remembering the pronunciation with short o (there is no local tradition of anything else) and the very different form which OE *fōm* has assumed in Frampton and Framilode, is it possible that the first syllable of Frocester represents OE *fōrsc*, a frog? Facetious place-names like Frog's Hall and Frog's Castle are commonly, later, applied to damp and abandoned buildings, and we have a close analogy in OE *Ulecestr*, now corrupted to Outchester (Northumberland), rendered by Ekwall as 'Roman fort inhabited by owls'.