

READING ABBNEY



2. an introduction
to the history of the abbey

2/6

Brian R. Kemp



Plate 1

A miniature (enlarged) of c 1250 by Matthew Paris, a monk of St. Albans, showing King Henry I holding a model of Reading Abbey. The picture is not a portrait and the model is not an accurate representation of the abbey church. (From British Museum, Royal MS. 14 C vii, f 8v).

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Reading museum & art gallery

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Introduction

Despite its modern appearance, Reading is an ancient and historic town. Its name betrays its antiquity, for it belongs to the group of place names ending in '-ing' which philologists assign to the earliest period of Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain after the collapse of Roman authority. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, Reading was an important royal vill and figured notably in the wars between King Alfred of Wessex and the Danish invaders.

With the foundation of the abbey in the twelfth century Reading began to play an important part in the history of English monasticism. Reading Abbey quickly became one of the richer and more important religious houses of medieval England, but it was not the only monastery to exist in the town in the Middle Ages. The Franciscan Friars arrived in Reading in the thirteenth century and eventually settled in 1285 at the western end of what is now Friar Street, where part of their church remains incorporated in Greyfriars Church. But even before the foundation of Reading Abbey, there was a nunnery in Reading. There is definite evidence of its existence in the first half of the eleventh century, but it may have been established earlier, perhaps in the period of monastic reform and foundation under King Edgar (959 - 975). Very little is known of this Anglo-Saxon house. The names of two only of its abbesses have survived. It was probably neither rich nor important and its site within the town cannot be established with certainty, although there are strong grounds for supposing that it was close by the church of St. Mary in the Butts. How and precisely when the nunnery came to an end remain unanswered questions, but the community may have been affected adversely by the arrival of

the Normans in England. It had definitely ceased to function by 1071 when William the Conqueror granted the former possessions of the nuns - St. Mary's church and eight hides of land - to his new abbey at Battle (Sussex).

The foundation of Reading Abbey

The abbey whose ruins remain and which forms the subject of this booklet owed its existence to an entirely new foundation undertaken in 1121 by Henry I, a younger son of William the Conqueror and the third Norman king of England, who reigned 1100 - 1135. In November 1120 the king's only legitimate son and heir, William, was drowned in the White Ship. It seems that this tragedy may have moved Henry I to begin the foundation of a religious house in the following year. For its site he chose the royal vill of Reading and for its first monks he looked to the Order of Cluny, a reformed branch of Benedictine, or Black Monk, monasticism which was noted for the splendour of its buildings and for the elaborate liturgical life of its monks¹. The order derived its name and distinctive character from the abbey of Cluny in Burgundy (founded early in the tenth century), whose abbot controlled, directly or indirectly, all houses of the order.

The beginnings of religious life at Reading can be partially reconstructed from some short annals written down in the twelfth century by an anonymous monk of the abbey². In 1121, at the request of Henry I, Abbot Pons of Cluny sent to England eight of his monks, of whom one, named Peter, was to be their prior. On their arrival in England they were joined by several monks from the priory of St. Pancras at Lewes (Sussex), which was then the oldest and most important house of the Cluniac Order in England. Together this party of monks arrived in Reading on 18th June and, we are told, they began the observance of the Cluniac Order in the monastery newly established there by the king. The exact size of the original community is not known, but there were probably at least twelve monks plus the prior. Accounts differ as to the full

number of monks intended by the founder. A contemporary Norman chronicler, Orderic Vitalis, wrote that Reading was founded for 200 monks³, which seems a rather high figure, while a record of 1376 stated that 100 monks had been originally intended⁴.

For nearly two years the community lived under the rule of Prior Peter, but on 15th April 1123 the brethren received their first abbot, Hugh, formerly prior of Lewes, and Peter returned to Cluny⁵. Until then the government of the house may have been subject in some degree to the supervision of the abbot of Cluny, in common with all other houses of the order. However, with the appointment of an abbot of its own, the house became completely autonomous and its independence was later adopted as a model by King Stephen when founding Faversham Abbey (Kent), which was likewise settled in the first place by monks of the Cluniac Order⁶. Reading was, therefore, unusual in having been colonised by Cluniac monks and in following the Cluniac observance, but yet in being constituted in 1123 as an independent abbey, not linked juridically with Cluny.

The influence of Cluny at Reading was paramount at the beginning and continued to exert itself throughout the twelfth and into the thirteenth centuries. This was partly owing to the fact that three abbots of Reading in the twelfth century had previously been priors of Lewes - Abbots Hugh I (1123 - 30), Anscher (1130 - 35) and Hugh II (1186 - 99), the latter being elevated to the abbacy of Cluny itself in 1199. Moreover, the abbot and convent of Reading had charitable and reciprocal prayer-agreements with Cluny and most English houses of the Cluniac Order. Generally speaking, contemporaries regarded Reading as a Cluniac house in the twelfth century.

However, the independence and abbatial status of Reading and the fact that it was a royal foundation resulted in a gradual drift away from the Cluniac sphere to that of ordinary Benedictine monasticism. The dignity of the abbot was enhanced in 1191 by Pope Clement III's grant of the right to wear the episcopal mitre, ring, gloves, dalmatic, tunicle and sandals on certain occasions and at certain kinds of ecclesiastical assembly⁷. This grant tended to make the abbey

more like certain of the great English Benedictine houses, such as Westminster and St. Albans, which had already been so honoured by the papacy. By 1225 Reading was being regarded as an ordinary Benedictine house by other English houses of that type, for in that year the abbot of Reading was selected as one of the presidents for the Chapter of the Benedictine Order in the province of Canterbury⁸. It may be significant that he did not in fact attend nor send a representative, but the abbey was certainly moving in this direction. It is difficult to say when it fully entered the Benedictine world, but a date between 1225 and 1250 seems plausible, for in 1253 the abbot was present at the Benedictine Chapter of that year and in 1277 the Chapter met in Reading Abbey⁹. In the later middle ages Reading was universally regarded as a Benedictine abbey.

NOTES

- 1 See Dom David Knowles, 'The Monastic Order in England' (Cambridge, 1940) pp 149-150.
- 2 'Annales Radingenses' ed. F. Liebermann in 'Ungedruckte Anglo-Normannische Geschichtsquellen' (Strassburg, 1879).
- 3 'Historia Ecclesiastica' ed. A. le Prévost, vol v (Société de l'Histoire de France, Paris, 1855) p 50.
- 4 'Calendar of Inquisitions, Miscellaneous' vol iii no. 1023.
- 5 'Annales Radingenses' p 10; 'Flores Historiarum' ed. H. R. Luard (London, 1890) vol ii p 58.
- 6 'Monasticon Anglicanum' vol iv p 575.
- 7 W. Holtzmann, 'Papsturkunden in England' vol iii (Göttingen, 1952) no. 433.

8 W. A. Pantin, 'Chapters of the English Black Monks 1215-1540' vol i (Camden Series, 1931) p 18.

9 Ibid. p 52, p 59.

3

The endowment of the abbey

The abbey was a rich one, ranking in the fourteenth century among the ten most wealthy Benedictine houses in England¹. Its material prosperity depended essentially on its landed endowment. A great deal can be known about the growth of the abbey's endowment, owing to the survival of a fine series of the abbey's cartularies, or charter books, in which copies were made of the charters and deeds which accompanied grants of land². The monks were particularly indebted to the generosity of their founder, Henry I, and to that of other members of the royal family in the twelfth century. The abbey continued to receive properties throughout its history, but the great bulk of its estate had been conveyed to it by the time of King Stephen's death in 1154. The years 1121 - 54 saw a steady flow of substantial grants to the abbey, several of them comprising whole manors with their churches.

Henry I himself granted the manors and churches of Reading, Leominster (Herefordshire) and Cholsey (Berkshire); the manor of Thatcham and the church of Wargrave (both Berkshire). This extensive initial endowment was included in the abbey's charter of foundation granted by the king at Rouen in 1125. The original charter has not survived and its text, in a somewhat corrupt but still reliable form, is known only from copies which the monks made in their cartularies³. It is almost certain that the manor of Reading was handed over to the newly arrived monks in 1121 and we know from a confirmatory bull granted by Pope Calixtus II in June 1123 that the abbey was then in possession of Reading, Leominster and Thatcham⁴. We also know from another source that the king had handed over Cholsey and the church of Wargrave before the end of 1123, the delay being caused by the need to recover

Noctum hic presentis & futuris omnibus ecclesie catholice filius. quod ego Adeliza regina uxore no-
 bilissimi regis henrici concessi & dedi deo & ecclesie sancte marie de Reading. & fratribus ibidem deo
 seruientibus centum solidos terre in manerio meo de Stanconia in greuelorda schura. ad perra-
 tionem continentis & regularium psonarum illuc conuenerunt in anno annuatiarii domini
 mei nobilissimi regis henrici & propter illas centum solidos terre concessi eis & dedi etiam
 eundem manerium Stanconie cum omnibus rebus eundem ecclesie pertinentibus & uolo deus propicio ut in pa-
 ce. & libere. & quiete teneant cum omnibus libalibus consuetudinibus cum quibus domini mei nobilissi-
 mus rex henricus ea in domum suo cenitio & in dedecus. Noctumque hic quod eandem etiam
 concessi ad continentia iuramenta ante corpus domini nostri ihesu christi. & ante corpus domini mei nobilis-
 simi regis henrici. I. hermanno capite. & allaredo capite. & hericone capite. &
 magistro Serlone. & eundem filio alani. & aalardo flandrie. & Gufrido de tregaz.
 & Ragnaldo de Wende. & Robeco de chalz. & Robeco de altra rupa. & Rocardo can.
 & Garino can. & Godeschales concelab. & Walco erablie.

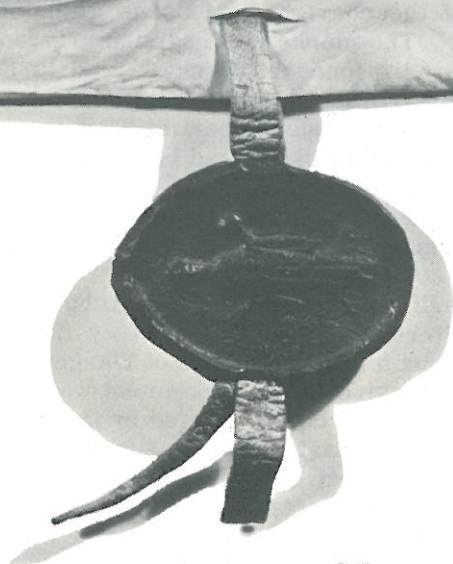


Plate 2

The original charter by Queen Adeliza granting to Reading Abbey the church of Stanton Harcourt (Oxon.) and 100 shillings worth of land there (1139-40). The queen's seal is appended to the charter. (British Museum, Additional Charter 19573).

the churches of Cholsey and Wargrave from the abbey of Mont St. Michel in Normandy⁵. Thus, although the foundation charter dates from the year 1125, it must not be assumed that the monks had received none of their lands from the king until that time, nor must 1125 be taken as the date of the foundation. In fact, one cannot give any one date for the foundation of a great religious house, such as Reading. The complicated process of foundation, from the time of the founder's inspiration to that of the full establishment of the religious corporation, in full possession of the founder's initial endowment, might take anything up to a decade or more. In Reading's case it took at least the four years which elapsed between the arrival of the first monks in 1121 and the granting of the charter.

Between 1130 and 1133 Henry I gave the church of Handborough (Oxfordshire)⁶ and, although no positive proof can be adduced, he probably added the manor of Bucklebury and the manor and church of Pangbourne (both Berkshire) before his death in 1135. Impressive as this list appears, the king's gifts were even more generous than the bald recital of the items would suggest. The grant of Reading put the abbot and convent in possession not only of the central manor but also of a number of appurtenant estates including the whole of Beenham, Sulhampstead Abbots and Tilehurst (all Berkshire). It also made the abbot and monks lords of the town of Reading, a situation which was to lead to friction with the burgesses from the mid-thirteenth century down to the dissolution of the abbey⁷. The grant of the church of Reading (which Henry had recovered from Battle Abbey in exchange for the manor of Appledram, Sussex) placed in the abbey's hands not only the spirituality of Reading itself (from which derived its possession of the three medieval churches in the town, St. Mary's, St. Giles' and St. Laurence's) but also the churches in the dependent manors and the right to certain annual payments known as pensions from the churches of Englefield, Purley and Sulham (all Berkshire). The grant of Leominster in distant Herefordshire included the little town and the central manor plus a cluster of sub-manors in the surrounding countryside, all of which had formerly belonged to an earlier decayed Saxon nunnery at Leominster. Likewise the church of Leominster was an old mother church and possessed

ecclesiastical rights over a large area of northern Herefordshire, rights which passed to the abbot and convent of Reading. The temporalities and spiritualities of Leominster were of sufficient value to allow the establishment there of a separate priory, strictly under the control of the parent house at Reading.

After the death of the founder in 1135 the abbey was further endowed by members of his family. He was succeeded as king by his nephew, Stephen. King Stephen visited the abbey for his uncle's funeral there in January 1136 and on that occasion made a grant of land worth £25 per annum in East Hendred (Berkshire) for the salvation of the dead king's soul⁸. It is interesting to note that the new king required the abbey to pay him £5 per annum for this land. He later granted the right to receive this payment to the abbey of Bec in Normandy, which subsequently passed the right onto its cell at Ogbourne St. George (Wiltshire). When the latter was dissolved with the other alien priories in 1415 the payment reverted to the Crown and was eventually granted by Henry VI to his new foundation at Eton. King Stephen made no other gifts to Reading and the most spectacular grants to the abbey in his reign came from Henry I's widow, Queen Adeliza, and his daughter, Matilda.

The queen-dowager, Adeliza, visited the abbey on the first anniversary of her husband's death in December 1136 and liberally endowed it with lands for the salvation of his soul and to provide for a fitting annual celebration of his anniversary for ever. To this end she gave the manor and church of Aston (Hertfordshire), an estate in Stanton Harcourt (Oxfordshire) and an annual payment of 100 shillings from her wharf in London⁹. The first of these was the most important and its transfer to the monks was carried out with impressive ceremonial; in the presence of a distinguished assembly of ecclesiastics and nobles the queen-dowager laid a pall on the High Altar of the abbey church as a token of her gift. In 1139 - 40 she added to these grants the church of Stanton Harcourt which until then had been in the hands of the powerful Roger, bishop of Salisbury, one of the most able and valued servants of Henry I¹⁰. The abbey's possession of the church of Aston (Hertfordshire) enabled it to strike a bargain with

St. Albans abbey in 1151 - 54, whereby Reading acquired the church of Bucklebury to add to its tenure of that manor given by Henry I¹¹.

Henry's daughter Matilda, called the Empress, widow of the Emperor Henry V of Germany and now the wife of Geoffrey, count of Anjou, found time amid her struggles with King Stephen for the throne of England to grant valuable properties to her father's abbey. In 1141 she rounded off his gift of the manor of Thatcham by adding to it the church of that vill¹² and she attempted to give the manor of Brimfield (Herefordshire)¹³, but this grant proved ineffective in the disordered conditions of the period. Between 1144 and 1147 she conveyed to the monks the manor of Blewbury (Berkshire)¹⁴, but not the church which belonged to the cathedral of Old Sarum, and in the same years she made what proved to be a largely unsuccessful grant of a number of churches connected with Berkeley (Gloucestershire)¹⁵. The difficulty was that two other abbeys, Bristol and Gloucester, also had claims to these churches. All three abbeys were involved in protracted and unedifying squabbles until in the 1170's the problems were finally solved by Reading surrendering the churches to Bristol and Gloucester and receiving from them in return annual pensions totalling 26 marks, that is £17 6s 8d.

In the 1140's Henry I's brother-in-law, King David I of Scotland, granted to the abbey lands, churches and rights at May and Rindalgrös in Fifeshire for the foundation of a second dependent priory at May. This priory remained under the control of Reading until the reign of Edward I in the late thirteenth century, when the unhappy relations between England and Scotland made it impossible for such a connection to continue. Abbot Robert of Reading (1269 - 90) attempted to sell the priory and was deposed by the monks for his pains, but by the early fourteenth century the abbey had lost control of its former Scottish possessions¹⁶.

These spectacular grants from the members of Henry I's family all came in the reign of Stephen. He died in October 1154 and, in accordance with the treaty of Westminster (1153), was succeeded by his second cousin Henry, son of the Empress and Geoffrey of Anjou. Thereafter the flow of gifts from the

royal family was much reduced, the only important ones being those from Henry II and John, count of Mortain (later king). Henry II's grant dated from 1164. By 1164 the construction of the abbey church, which began soon after 1121, had advanced sufficiently for the solemn dedication to take place. The lapse of some forty years was not exceptional; to take two other examples, the priory church at Lewes was begun in 1078 - 81 and not dedicated until 1147, while Cirencester abbey church, begun in 1131, was not dedicated until 1176¹⁷. Moreover, in Reading's case building was no doubt interrupted by the strife of Stephen's reign. Indeed, in the early 1150's much to the monks' dismay the king constructed a small castle within the abbey precinct. It was soon destroyed by an Angevin force from Wallingford, but it prompted the monks to obtain a bull from Pope Eugenius III prohibiting the erection of castles or defensive works on the abbey's lands¹⁸. The solemn dedication of the abbey church was performed on 19th April 1164 by Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, in the presence of Henry II and a large gathering of magnates and prelates¹⁹. This was the year in which was raging the quarrel between the king and his archbishop which was to lead to Becket's murder in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. The ceremony at Reading was in fact the last occasion on which the two met in public before the fateful council of Northampton in October 1164 from which the archbishop fled into exile. However, the ill-feeling engendered by the dispute did not mar the occasion at Reading and, according to a contemporary Norman chronicler, Robert of Torigny, the king royally entertained the monks and guests for three days. In celebration of the event Henry granted to the abbey an annual payment from the royal exchequer of 40 marks (£26 13s 4d), to be allocated from the profits of the king's manor of Hoo (Kent)²⁰. In 1205 King John altered this grant to that of a permanent grant of land in the manor of Hoo. For the monks this was a change for the better and provides an example of King John's kindness toward Reading Abbey.

John's interest in the abbey seems to have arisen in the reign of his elder brother, Richard I, who succeeded their father as king in 1189. In 1191, as count of Mortain, John gave the monks a gold cup worth 5 marks, but in the following year he granted an annual money payment which indicated his

devotion to the abbey's most important relic, the Hand of St. James. The relic had been deposited in the abbey by the founder, Henry I, at the request of the Empress Matilda, who had returned with it from Germany after the death of her first husband, the Emperor Henry V, in 1125. Henry I charged the abbot and convent to receive the Hand with all veneration and to show it the honour and reverence befitting the remains of so great an apostle. In consequence, the Hand was enclosed in a reliquary, of which no details survive but which may be presumed to have had considerable intrinsic and artistic value. In the latter part of the year 1189 this valuable shrine was seized by Richard I in his preparations for the Third Crusade. The act seems to have affected his brother, John, and he was moved to compensate the monks for the loss of the shrine. In 1192 he gave to the abbey in free alms 1 mark of gold to be paid annually by himself and his heirs in perpetuity²¹. After his accession asking in 1199 he confirmed his grant, making clear in his new charter that it had been as reparation for his brother's act in confiscating the shrine. As a result of John's gift the Hand, which had been left behind by Richard I, was provided with a new reliquary and by 1250 the annual payment, altered by Henry III to one of 10 marks of silver (£6 13s 4d), was being used to furnish large wax candles, possibly to burn before the shrine²². The payment was not made in the later years of Henry III's reign and in 1292 Edward I paid the abbey £100 to be released from the obligation²³. The original purpose of John's gift had in any case long since been fulfilled.

The munificence of the royal family in the twelfth century accounted for very much the greater part of the abbey's temporal and spiritual possessions. The other grants received during that century and the numerous small acquisitions made by the abbot and convent in the later Middle Ages represented a minor part in comparison. Reading was pre-eminently a royal abbey. There is not room to give details of all the other grants, but some of the more important must be noticed.

In 1127 Robert, earl of Leicester, a close associate of Henry I, confirmed a grant by his knight Albold of a manor in Houghton Conquest (Bedfordshire)²⁴. In 1130 - 33 a certain Ingelram Apostolicus, formerly an official of some kind in

Henry I's government, became a monk at Reading and brought with him his manor of Whitsbury (then Wiltshire, now Hampshire)²⁵. It is extremely likely that these men were moved to endow Reading because of their connections with its founder. Ingelram's gift was somewhat complicated. He had intended it to include the church of Whitsbury, but he had already given the church to the neighbouring Augustinian priory of Breamore (Hampshire). The conflicting claims were eventually settled on the occasion of Reading Abbey's dedication in 1164. At the instance of Henry II Abbot Roger of Reading granted the church to the canons of Breamore, who were to hold it of the abbey for an annual payment of 5 lbs of incense.

The next large grant came in 1133 when Adeliza d'Ivry gave her manor and church of Rowington (Warwickshire)²⁶. Then, in 1137, William, King Stephen's almoner, entered the abbey as a monk and gave his land at Wigston Parva (Leicestershire)²⁷. Between 1135 - 40 Geoffrey Purcel, usher of the king's chamber, assumed the monastic habit at Reading and obtained a charter from King Stephen granting to the abbey his land at Windsor (Berkshire) and his manor of Catteshall (Surrey)²⁸. However, the monks failed to gain possession of Catteshall. Three and a half hides of land in Lenborough (Buckinghamshire) were given by Alan son of Robert in 1138 - 48²⁹. Between 1141 and 1151 Jocelin of Louvain, brother of Queen Adeliza (Henry I's second wife), made over to the abbey an estate worth 100 shillings per annum in Diddlesfold (Sussex)³⁰ and made small additions to this gift when he attended his sister's burial in the abbey in 1151. In 1154 - 5 Roger, earl of Hereford, after a rather boisterous life decided to end his days in a monastery and, before entering Gloucester Abbey, he granted to the monks of Reading the manor of Broadward (Herefordshire) in compensation for the damage which he and his men had caused to their property during the troubles of Stephen's reign³¹. The monks later lost possession of half this manor. Some time in Henry II's reign William de Ferrers, third earl of Derby, granted small properties in Stanford-in-the-Vale (Berkshire)³² and in c 1175 William de Mandeville, third earl of Essex, gave some land at Kidding-ton in Streatley (Berkshire)³³. The more significant acquisitions in the thirteenth century were the manors of Sheffield in Burghfield and Ufton Nervet (both Berkshire), from William

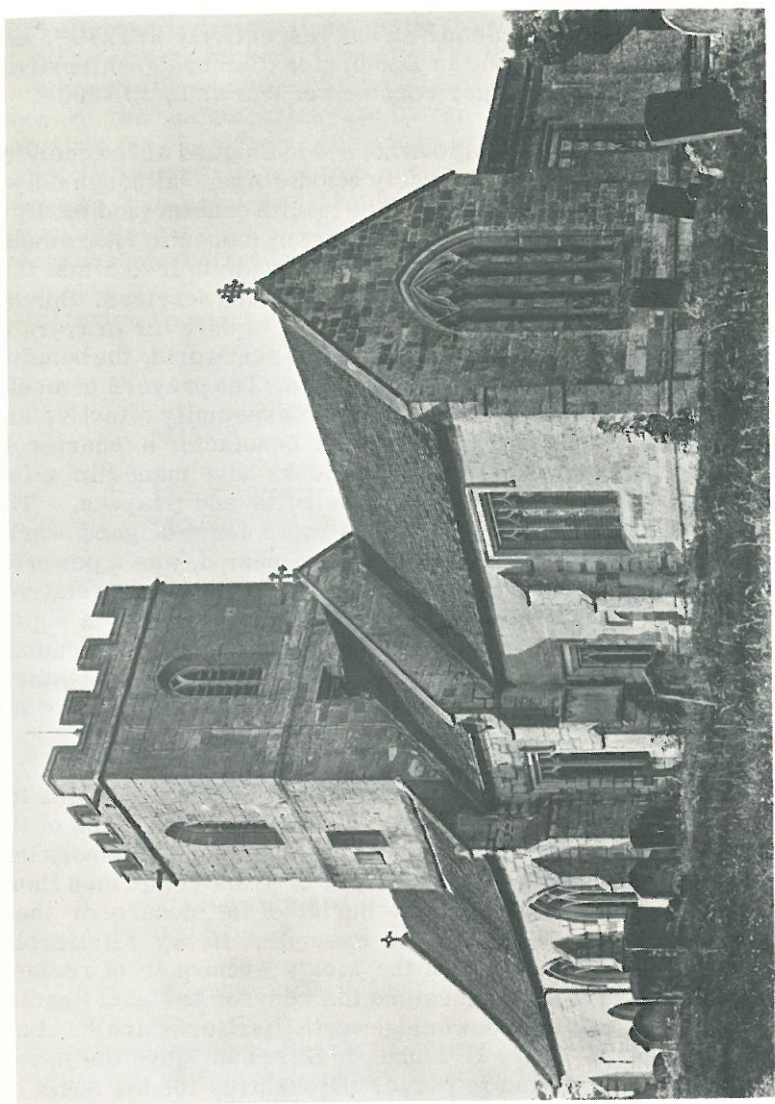


Plate 3

The church of Rowington, Warwickshire, one of the churches belonging to Reading Abbey. It was given by Adeliza d'Ivry in 1133.

de Huntercombe and John Neirnut respectively in 1270³⁴, and the manor of Southwood in Doddington (Cambridgeshire) from Ela Longespée, dowager countess of Warwick, in 1280³⁵.

Hundreds of other religious houses in England were receiving grants of all kinds in the early Middle Ages, although only a few on the scale of Reading. The twelfth century (and earlier) was particularly an age of widespread monastic endowment. As in Reading's case most gifts were made in free alms, that is freely and quit of all secular charges and services. Donors expected nothing in return for their gifts save the prayers of the monks during their lives and, in the next world, the benefits which derived from good works in this. The prayers of monks were in the twelfth century felt to be especially effective and beneficial. Indeed, sometimes a benefactor's charter to Reading Abbey will say that the monks have made him a full partaker of all their spiritual benefits and prayers. The granting of properties to monks was a form of good works which, in the religious thinking of the period, was a powerful aid to the salvation of the souls of the donors and their relatives after death. Many of the abbey's charters reflect this - gifts are made, in the first place to God and to St. Mary of Reading, and only then to the monks who serve God in the monastery, 'for the redemption of my soul' or 'for the remission of my sins' and so on.

However, in some cases there were specific reasons for the grants to Reading Abbey. Mention has been made of the grants of land which accompanied the entry of the donors into the abbey as monks. A second type of grant comprises those made in conjunction with the burial of the donors or their relatives in the abbey. For example, Henry FitzGerold, hereditary chamberlain of the king's exchequer of receipt, who died in 1174 - 5, bequeathed his body for burial at Reading and a small estate at Sawbridgeworth (Hertfordshire)³⁶. Late in the reign of Henry II Isabel de Sifrewast gave the monks half a virgate of land in Purley (Berkshire) for the souls of, among others, her husbands who lay buried in the abbey³⁷. Towards the end of the twelfth century we find the abbey beginning to acquire properties by purchase and this became the normal means of acquiring new land in the thirteenth century and later. This development was not peculiar to Reading,

but reflected the general drying up during the twelfth century of pious and unremunerative conveyances to monasteries, particularly those of the older religious orders. The importance of the monasteries as power-houses of prayer and salvation for the faithful grew less in the thirteenth century. Most of the purchases of this period and later were strictly business transactions and some of them show the abbey taking advantage of people's financial difficulties to buy up land. For instance, in c 1231 Adam de Mora sold to the abbey 1 virgate of land in Burghfield (Berkshire) for £40 to pay off the 'great debt' which he owed the Jews of Winchester³⁸.

NOTES

- 1 W. A. Pantin, 'Chapters of the English Black Monks' vol iii (Camden Series, 1937) p 157-9.
- 2 For the Reading Abbey cartularies see G. R. C. Davis, 'Medieval Cartularies of Great Britain' (London, 1958) p 91.
- 3 For example, British Museum, Egerton MS 3031 f 13.
- 4 W. Holtzmann, 'Papsturkunden in England' vol iii (Gottingen, 1952) no. 9.
- 5 'Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum' vol ii ed. C. Johnson and H. A. Cronne (Oxford, 1956) no. 1418.
- 6 Egerton 3031 f 14v.
- 7 See Rev. Charles Coates, 'The History and Antiquities of Reading' (London, 1802) pp 49-62; J. B. Hurry, 'Reading Abbey' (London, 1901) pp 55-62.
- 8 Egerton 3031 f 17
- 9 Respectively Egerton 3031 f 16, f 16v, f 16v.

- 10 British Museum, Harley MS 1708 f 20v.
- 11 British Museum, Additional Charter 19590.
- 12 Egerton 3031 f 15v.
- 13 Ibid. f 63.
- 14 British Museum, Additional Charter 19579.
- 15 Egerton 3031 f 15v.
- 16 See 'Records of the Priory of the Isle of May' ed. J. Stuart (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1868)
- 17 Respectively, 'Early Yorkshire Charters' vol viii, 'Honour of Warenne' ed. C. T. Clay (Yorks. Arch. Soc., 1949) p 84; and A. Morey, 'Bartholomew of Exeter' (Cambridge, 1937) p 40.
- 18 Holtzmann, op. cit. vol iii no. 86.
- 19 'Annales Radingenses Posteriores' ed. C. W. Previté-Orton, (English Historical Review, 1922) p 400.
- 20 Egerton 3031 f 24v.
- 21 Ibid. f 46.
- 22 'Close Rolls 1247-51' p 389.
- 23 'Extracts from the Issue Rolls of the Exchequer, Henry III to Henry VI' (Record Commission, 1837) p 104.
- 24 Egerton 3031 f 36.
- 25 Ibid. f 15.

- 26 Ibid. f 36
- 27 Ibid. f 18v.
- 28 British Museum, Additional Charter 19584.
- 29 Egerton 3031 f 42v.
- 30 Ibid. f 36v.
- 31 'Camden Miscellany' vol xxii (Camden Series, 1964) p 23.
- 32 Egerton 3031 f 40v.
- 33 Ibid. f 40v.
- 34 Respectively British Museum, Harley MS 1708 f 209v and f 210v.
- 35 'Catalogue of Ancient Deeds' vol iii C 3589.
- 36 Egerton 3031 f 38.
- 37 Ibid. f 81v.
- 38 Harley 1708 f 146.



Plate 4

The second seal of Reading Abbey, 1328. Obverse (above) shows the Virgin and Child, flanked by St. James the Great and St. John the Evangelist. Reverse (below) shows King Henry I holding a model of the abbey church, flanked by St. Peter and St. Paul. The model of the church is not intended as an accurate representation.

4

The abbey's privileges

As well as being richly endowed, the abbey was also highly privileged, chiefly by grant of the founder. Of particular value to the monks was the privilege that, when an abbot died, the possessions of the house remained in the hands of the prior and convent during the abbatial vacancy. The Crown, as patron, would ordinarily take control until a new abbot was elected, but in Reading's case this and the consequent danger of royal exploitation were avoided by Henry I's special grant. The abbey was exempted from various sorts of taxation on land, the main source of extraordinary royal revenue in the twelfth century, but it failed to gain exemption from the newer and more important taxation of movables in the thirteenth century and later. The monks and the men living on their lands were not to be liable to tolls on rivers and roads nor to market tolls throughout England; nor were their chattels to be requisitioned by the Crown or any local official. However, these exemptions were not always observed. The abbey had a number of weekly markets and annual fairs in various of its manors. In c 1129 - 33 Henry I granted a fair of St. Laurence in Reading and in c 1164 Henry II added another annual fair there on the feast of St. James the Great, perhaps in association with the abbey's celebrated relic. Yet another fair in Reading was granted by King John in 1205. It was on the feast of SS Philip and James the Less and the grant was accompanied by the king's gift of part of the skull of St. Philip. There was a fair of SS Peter and Paul at Leominster in 1189, but in the thirteenth century the date was eventually moved to the feast of St. Eadfrid. In 1222 Henry III granted an annual fair at Thatcham on the feast of the Translation of St. Thomas of Canterbury and in 1271 an annual fair of All Saints at Hoo¹.

In the foundation charter Henry I gave Reading Abbey the right to have a mint and moneyer in Reading. In the event, however, the mint was established in London in the 1120's, producing coins of a distinctive type some of which still survive². The mint brought financial profit to the monks and added to the abbey's prestige, but during the reign of Henry II (1154 - 89) it either fell out of use or was suppressed by the king. Nevertheless, the abbey continued to claim the privilege and a mint figured in general royal confirmations to the monks in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was, however, expressly excluded from that of Edward II³, but the mint was reconstituted at Reading by Edward III in 1338⁴ and a number of coins produced on this authority are known⁵.

The abbot and convent of Reading were granted extensive judicial privileges over their lands and men by Henry I. This aspect of the abbey's affairs is one of considerable complexity for the historian, since the precise nature of the privileges changed as the scope and character of royal justice developed. It is clear, however, that by the mid-thirteenth century most of the judicial business arising on the abbey's lands was dealt with by the royal courts and not by the abbey's courts. Nevertheless, the profits of this judicial business (amercelements, fines, felons' chattels, and so on) belonged to the abbey and the abbey's officials carried out all, or most, of the administration involved before and after the hearing of cases in the king's courts. For this reason the abbey had gaols at Reading and Leominster and gallows and ducking-stools in its manors.

The abbot and monks were made lords of the hundreds of Reading and Leominster by Henry I. In 1205, on acquiring land in the manor of Hoo (Kent), they became lords of part of the hundred of Hoo. The hundred was until quite recent times the normal subdivision of the shire for administrative and judicial purposes. The hundreds of Reading and Leominster were appurtenances of the royal manors of those places and hence passed quite naturally with them to the abbey. The jurisdiction of the hundreds, which now came under the abbey's control, was exercised through the hundred courts of Reading and Leominster and extended over the lands of other lords within the hundreds as well as those belonging

to the monks. During Stephen's troubled reign the abbey lost control of that part of the hundred of Reading where it did not hold lands of its own (known technically as the 'forinsec' or 'foreign' hundred). It reverted to the Crown and remained in royal hands until 1208 when it was restored to the abbey by King John. The 'foreign' hundred of Reading later became known as the hundred of Theale, while the hundred of Reading came to comprise those lands in the old hundred of Reading which belonged to the abbey. The two hundreds, of Reading and Theale, together formed the abbey's Liberty of Reading. A similar distinction was drawn at Leominster between those lands in the hundred held by Reading Abbey and those lands held by other lords, but no distinctive name was devised for the latter. The abbey's jurisdiction at Leominster was termed its Liberty of Leominster. In each Liberty a seneschal presided over the abbey's court and a bailiff performed the routine administrative work. During the thirteenth century the office of coroner developed in each Liberty. There were two coroners in the Liberty of Reading by 1241 and two in the Liberty of Leominster in 1292. It is not to be supposed that there were rigid barriers, as it were, round these Liberties which excluded royal interference. There were not. The judicial and administrative business carried out was done at the king's command and under the ultimate supervision of his government. The abbot could not refuse to obey a royal command, for, if he did so, the privileges would be cancelled. The Liberties of Reading and Leominster added to the abbey's dignity and brought it a certain financial profit, but in no way could they impair or impede the king's government of his kingdom.

NOTES

- 1 For these fairs, see respectively Egerton 3031 f 14v; Ibid. f 23; Ibid. f 30v; 'Calendar of Charter Rolls' vol ii p 356; 'Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum' vol i p 486; 'Calendar of Charter Rolls' vol ii p 175.

- ² See G. C. Brooke, 'A Catalogue of English Coins in the British Museum, The Norman Kings' vol i (London, 1916) p clxxix.
- ³ Harley 1708 f 43v.
- ⁴ Ibid. f 45.
- ⁵ C. Oman, 'The Coinage of England' (Oxford, 1931) p 168.

5

Financial difficulties in the thirteenth century

In spite of its large endowments and valuable privileges, the abbey had fallen seriously in debt by the reign of Edward I (1272 - 1307). The causes of its financial difficulties are not exactly known, but several reasons may be suggested. The upkeep of the huge abbey church and the conventual buildings of the monastery must have become a heavy charge on the finances by the middle of the thirteenth century. In the later years of Henry III's reign we hear of a monk named Maurice who was keeper of the works of the abbey. This office does not appear to have been a permanent department in the abbey and its occurrence at this time suggests that important new building or restoration operations were then in progress.

Another serious drain on the abbey's revenues resulted from the entertainment of guests and pilgrims to which the abbey was bound by its foundation charter. Moreover, the king as patron of the abbey founded by his ancestor could exercise a special right to hospitality. He and some of his household would from time to time lodge in the abbey for a number of days. Most of the kings since the time of Henry I had taken advantage of this right, but Henry III (1216 - 72) was particularly fond of staying in the abbey. The monks often received gifts from the king on these occasions and it was to their advantage to be on good terms with him, but his visits cannot but have cost them dear. The Crown's patronal rights in the abbey extended to the maintenance of certain of the king's servants there temporarily or for life. In 1263, for example, Henry III sent to the monks a horse and its keeper to be maintained for a month at their expense¹. In 1298 Richard de Ry, the king's serjeant, 'who has long and faithfully served the king', was sent to the abbey by Edward I with the request

of maintenance for life².

The abbey's general charitable obligations used up further resources. Abbot Anscher (1130 - 35), 'on account of the large number of various infirmities among the poor at that time', established a leper house, known as the hospital of St. Mary Magdalene, within the abbey precinct. The lepers were provided with accommodation, food and clothing and they also had their own chaplain who was supported out of abbey funds³. In 1189 - 93 Abbot Hugh II founded a second hospital, known originally as the hospital 'ante portam' and later as that of St. John the Baptist. It was founded for the housing and maintenance of thirteen brethren (later sisters as well), for the daily support of thirteen other poor persons, and for the reception of needy travellers. The church of St. Laurence at the west gate of the abbey was appropriated to the hospital and the inmates used its north aisle as their chapel, the vicar serving also as chaplain⁴. It is rather nice to note that the abbot's scheme was confirmed by Hubert Walter, bishop of Salisbury (and later archbishop of Canterbury, justiciar and chancellor), for the salvation of the soul of Ranulf de Glanville, Henry II's great justiciar, in whose household the bishop had been brought up.

A final reason which might explain the growing insolvency of the abbey in the thirteenth century was the increasing frequency of royal and papal taxation.

The first signs of the abbey's indebtedness appear in 1253 when the abbey obtained from Henry III letters patent to its free tenants asking for their financial aid to clear its debts⁵. A similar request to the abbey's men was made by Edward I while visiting Caversham in 1275⁶. On the same occasion the king wrote to the Sieneese merchants in London to whom the abbey was in debt begging them to postpone for two years the deadline for payment⁷. These measures did not solve the problems, however, and it was clear that drastic internal economies must be made in the running of the abbey. In February 1275 Edward I ordered the abbot to remove from the abbey and from Leominster Priory all servants and horses lodged there by the king and others and not to take on new commitments of this kind until the abbey and priory had

returned to a state of solvency⁸. Later in the year came active royal intervention in the management of Leominster. In December 1275 the king took over the administration of Leominster Priory, appointing Roland of Earley as custodian with instructions to devote all its revenues, after providing for the monks and the customary almsgiving, to the discharge of its debts⁹. In March 1286 the administration of Reading Abbey itself was taken under royal control and committed to the king's clerk, Ralph of Broughton. It is clear that this was done with the consent of the abbot and convent and they were assured that this royal management would not prejudice the abbey's rights in future abbatial vacancies¹⁰. The monastic life of the house continued as before. By January 1289 the financial state of the abbey had been restored to the king's satisfaction and Ralph of Broughton handed the administration back to the monks. In the following year Abbot Robert resigned and William of Sutton was elected in his place. In order to spare the abbey unnecessary expense, Edward I directed the new abbot to do homage to the king's treasurer, presumably at Westminster, and not to travel for this purpose to wherever the king himself happened to be¹¹. Despite these moves, the abbey's financial affairs had not been set absolutely to rights. On his election in 1305 Abbot Nicholas of Whaplode found the abbey in debt and was obliged to make cuts in the number of servants employed.

NOTES

- 1 'Close Rolls 1261-64' p 311.
- 2 'Calendar of Close Rolls 1296-1302' p 211.
- 3 Egerton 3031 f 11v.
- 4 Harley 1708 f 198.
- 5 'Calendar of Patent Rolls 1247-58' p 233.
- 6 'Calendar of Patent Rolls 1272-81' p 78.

- 7 Harley 1708 f 11v.
- 8 'Calendar of Patent Rolls 1272-81' p 81.
- 9 Ibid. p 128.
- 10 'Calendar of Patent Rolls 1281-92' p 242.
- 11 'Calendar of Close Rolls 1288-96' p 154.

6

The abbots of Reading

It is a matter of regret for the historian of Reading Abbey that no chronicle of the house has survived, if indeed the monks ever made and kept one. A few brief annalistic jottings, dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are all that we have to supply information on the abbey's domestic history and on its reaction to outside events. The history of the abbey must for the most part depend upon material gleaned from the chronicles of other monasteries and from the copious records of English medieval government. Available information is fullest on the abbots of Reading and a number of points are worthy of mention.

The first abbot, Hugh I (1123 - 30), was an outstanding ecclesiastical figure in his time. His worth came to the attentions of Pope Honorius II who in 1128 tried to get him into the papal curia. However, the pope was resisted both by King Henry I, who threatened to withdraw his grants to the abbey, and by the Reading monks, who begged not to be deprived of so worthy an abbot so soon after the establishment of their house. Honorius II was obliged to bow before these protests, but he succeeded in summoning Hugh to Rome for part of 1129¹. Eventually, in 1130, Hugh was advanced to the archbishopric of Rouen, one of the most important ecclesiastical dignities in Henry I's Anglo-Norman dominions. There can be no doubt that Hugh's seven years as abbot of Reading were crucial in the establishment of monasticism along pure and secure lines in Reading. During this period, William of Malmesbury, the discerning chronicler-precentor of Malmesbury Abbey, paid a glowing tribute to the holiness and hospitality of the Reading monks².

The career of Abbot Reginald (1154 - 58) is interesting. He appears to have entered the abbey as a monk from a position in King Stephen's government and to have risen thereafter to the abbacy of Reading. For some reason, not now recoverable, he was removed from this office by Henry II in 1158 and later became first abbot of Walden (Essex)³.

Abbot William I (1165 - 73) left the abbey in 1173 to be elevated to the archbishopric of Bordeaux in Henry II's duchy of Aquitaine. He suffered imprisonment in 1173 - 4 at the hands of Henry's sons who had risen in rebellion against their father. The next abbot, Joseph, ruled 1173 - 86, then abdicated probably on account of ill-health or age, and died in the abbey in 1190 or 1191. His successor, Hugh II (1186 - 99), left Reading in 1199 on his election to the abbacy of Cluny.

The next two abbots, Helias (1199 - 1213) and Simon (1213 - 26), were both on friendly terms with King John. The king borrowed volumes from the abbey's library and so trusted the monks as to leave in their custody on one occasion the rolls of his chamber and the rolls and seal of his exchequer⁴. In the late autumn of 1214, after the failure of John's plans to recover his lost Norman and Angevin lands from King Philip II of France and at a time when the clouds were gathering ominously around the king's throne at home, he sent a deputation, headed by Abbot Simon of Reading, to collect from the cities of Ghent and Ypres the large sums of money which they owed him⁵. Perhaps the greatest testimony to the abbey's loyalty and close connections with the king came in July 1215 after John's entente with the papacy and after the granting of Magna Carta at Runnymede. In a bull dated 7th July 1215 Pope Innocent III appointed Abbot Simon of Reading as one of the three executors of his sentence of excommunication on those who resisted King John. The other two were Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester, who had remained with the king when most other bishops deserted him during his earlier dispute with Rome, and Pandulf, papal legate, whom one would expect to find in a commission of this sort⁶. The presence of the abbot of Reading is of the highest significance in the close relations between the abbey and King John. The same abbot, Simon, served John's boy successor, Henry III. He was for a time warden of the royal castle of



Plate 5

An early 16th-century representation of the abbot of Reading (centre) and other lords spiritual in procession to parliament. Above him there appears a shield with the arms of the abbey (three scallops, from its principal relic, the Hand of St. James) ready for impaling with the personal arms of the abbot (from the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ashmole Rolls no. 45).

Devizes and a justice in eyre in the west midland counties of England.

The later abbots of Reading are less interesting than those of the first hundred years. They seem to have played their parts in the ecclesiastical and political life of the nation at a less spectacular level. In the later centuries we do not find abbots of Reading appointed from outside nor is it the case that the abbots left Reading to take up more important positions elsewhere. After the election of Abbot Adam of Lathbury in 1226, who had previously been prior of Leominster, the abbots were elected from among the Reading monks. With the exception of Abbot Robert of Burgate (1269 - 90), they ruled the monastery until their deaths. The abbots of Reading were mitred and attended parliament as spiritual peers of the realm. They also performed useful functions locally on behalf of the government, serving on various commissions in the county of Berkshire and acting as collectors of clerical taxation in the diocese of Salisbury. With the last abbot, however, considerable interest returns, as will be seen later.

NOTES

- 1 See W. Holtzmann, 'Papsturkunden in England' vol iii nos. 15-23.
- 2 'De Gestis Regum Anglorum' ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series, London, 1887-9) vol ii p 489.
- 3 See H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, 'The Governance of Mediaeval England' (Edinburgh, 1963) pp 256-7.
- 4 'Rotuli Litterarum Patentium' vol i p 145.
- 5 Ibid. p 122.
- 6 'Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III concerning England' ed. C. R. Cheney and W. H. Semple (London, 1953) pp 207-9.

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- 5 Ibid. p 122.
- 6 'Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III concerning England' ed. C. R. Cheney and W. H. Semple (London, 1953) pp 207-9.

7

Notable events

During its four hundred and eighteen years of continuous monastic life, the abbey was at various times the scene of important events. It was conveniently situated, roughly in the centre of southern England, it was easy of access, standing at the junctions of important roads and waterways, and it was near (but not too near) London. The abbey buildings were ideally suited for the holding of assemblies and the great abbey church provided a fine setting for solemn ecclesiastical ceremonies. It was a favourite stopping place for kings, particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For these reasons the people of medieval Reading must have been used to seeing kings and queens, magnates and prelates of the realm riding through the streets to the abbey. A few of the more notable events which took place in the abbey are worthy of mention.

At Reading Abbey in March 1185 King Henry II received Heraclius, patriarch of Jerusalem, and Roger, master of the Knights Hospitallers of Jerusalem. This meeting linked the abbey for a short time with events happening in the Holy Land. The distinguished visitors had come to offer the crown of the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, whose ruler was a sick man and whose borders were hard pressed by the infidels, to Henry II, one of the most powerful rulers of twelfth-century Europe. The patriarch read letters of exhortation from Pope Lucius III and displayed the relics which he had brought - relics of the Nativity, Passion and Resurrection of Our Lord, the keys of the Tower of David and of the Holy Sepulchre. The king received the relics with all honour and, after hearing of the distressing plight of Jerusalem, he and his court were moved to tears, but he postponed a decision on the matter

until he could have further counsel of his magnates. A council was held on 18th March at Clerkenwell in London and the offer of the crown of Jerusalem was prudently declined¹.

In July 1279, shortly after his appointment as archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham held an ecclesiastical council for the province of Canterbury at Reading Abbey². The archbishop, a professed Franciscan friar, promulgated at Reading a sweeping programme of reform for the church in his province. Some of the decrees of the council offended Edward I, however, and were partly responsible for the passing of the statute of Mortmain later in the year which forbade the transfer of property to the Church without royal licence.

On 19th May 1359 an event took place in the abbey which was to have far-reaching consequences for English history. On that day John of Gaunt, earl of Richmond and one of the sons of Edward III, married his cousin, Blanche, daughter of Henry, duke of Lancaster, and heiress to the vast Lancaster estates. Edward III and his sons, together with the magnates of the realm, came to Reading for the celebrations which included feasting and tournaments for three days³. To John of Gaunt and Blanche was later born Henry Bolingbroke, who in 1399 deposed Richard II and himself ascended the throne as Henry IV, the first of the Lancastrian kings of England.

On 6th March 1453 parliament assembled in the abbey⁴. In the Middle Ages there was no set place for the holding of parliaments. Parliament was in origin a much enlarged form of the king's court and, since the king did not reside in one place, but travelled about his kingdom, it was natural that he should summon parliament to meet in various parts of the realm where he intended to be. It is true that the majority of parliaments assembled at Westminster, but others met at such places as Lincoln, York, Salisbury and Gloucester where facilities for the accommodation of a large gathering were available. The parliament which met in Reading Abbey in 1453 was the only one to be newly summoned there, but on a few other occasions parliaments were adjourned to Reading from Westminster.

At Michaelmas 1464 an event directly affecting the Crown

of England took place in the abbey. During the earlier part of 1464 negotiations had been carried on between Edward IV of England and Louis XI of France, largely at the instigation of Richard Neville, earl of Warwick (the Kingmaker), to try to establish a permanent peace between the two countries. To further this end it was suggested that Edward IV should marry a princess of France and the lady singled out was Bona, Louis XI's sister-in-law. However, while the English mission was in France, Edward IV secretly married Elizabeth Woodville on 1st May. The marriage was kept secret until it was publicly announced at a council held at Reading Abbey during Michaelmas, when Warwick and the other lords heard of the extraordinary affair⁵. Then, on Michaelmas Day (29th September) Elizabeth Woodville was escorted into the abbey church by the duke of Clarence and the earl of Warwick and honoured as queen of England. The occasion was made one of rejoicing with feasting and jousting.

The abbey played a useful part in the ecclesiastical life of the kingdom. Mention has been made of the provincial council held there in 1279 by Archbishop John Pecham. Legatine councils (that is, councils held by papal legates and attended by representatives of the entire English church) were held in the abbey in 1206, 1213 and 1240. The second was called to discuss the question of compensation to be paid by King John to the English clergy for the seizure of their possessions during the Interdict (1208 - 1214). The third was held by the great papal legate, Otto, and was mainly concerned with a demand for clerical taxation from Pope Gregory IX to assist him in his dispute with the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II. A number of English bishops were consecrated in Reading Abbey, including the famous Robert Grosseteste, who was consecrated bishop of Lincoln on 17th June 1235 by Edmund Rich, archbishop of Canterbury and later saint, a native of Abingdon⁶.

NOTES

- 1 Ralph de Diceto, 'Opera Historica' ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series, London, 1876) vol ii pp 32-4.
- 2 'Annales Monastici' ed. H. R. Luard (Rolls Series, London, 1864-9) vol iv pp 281, 476.
- 3 See S. Armitage-Smith, 'John of Gaunt' (Westminster, 1904) pp 14-15 and references there cited.
- 4 This was the most successful parliament of Henry VI's unhappy reign. See B. P. Wolffe, 'Acts of Resumption in the Lancastrian Parliaments 1399-1456' (English Historical Review, 1958) pp 608-9.
- 5 See S. B. Chrimes, 'Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII' (London, 1964) pp 92-4.
- 6 Roger of Wendover, 'Chronica' ed. H. G. Hewlett (Rolls Series, London, 1886-9) vol iii p 102.

8

The death of the last abbot and the end of the monastery

The last great event which took place in the abbey brings us to the dissolution and takes the theme back to the abbots of Reading. In the 1530's the government of Henry VIII carried out the general dissolution of the English monasteries, as part of an ecclesiastical policy which involved the abolition of papal authority over the church in England and the substitution of the royal headship of the Church of England, which has continued with slight changes and with a brief interval during the reign of Mary I, to the present day¹. Reading Abbey is of particular interest in this context, for the abbot of Reading was one of the extremely few heads of religious houses who suffered death for resisting the Crown solely on religious grounds. In 1536 an Act of Parliament was passed providing for the extinction of all religious houses with an annual income of less than £200 and declaring that the properties of monasteries so dissolved belonged to the Crown. Reading Abbey, with the other large abbeys, was not covered by this act, for its income was in the region of £2,000 per annum, but in the later 1530's the government brought considerable pressure on the surviving religious houses to dissolve themselves voluntarily and to surrender their possessions to the king. The prospect of comfortable pensions was extended to abbots, priors and monks as an incentive to surrender to the royal will. Most monasteries took advantage of these offers, as did for example the abbot and monks of Abingdon, the only other great Berkshire abbey. The same thing was tried on the abbot of Reading, Hugh Cook Faringdon, but was met with firm resistance. Before the late 1530's the abbot had been on very good terms with Henry VIII and even in 1537 officiated at the lying-in-state of Henry's third wife, Queen Jane Seymour², who had died giving birth to the king's

only son, the future Edward VI. However, the king was not the only person with whom the religious needed to be on good terms at that time. The ecclesiastical policies of the government were largely carried out by the ruthless and calculating Thomas Cromwell, to whom Henry had delegated his new authority as Head of the English Church. Indeed, as early as 1534 the abbot apparently found it expedient to cultivate Cromwell's goodwill, by granting him an annuity of 20 marks from the abbey's manor of Aston (Hertfordshire)³. In 1536 Cromwell, with his son, was appointed steward of the abbey for life which brought him £23 6s 8d per annum⁴ in addition to his annuity and in 1539 he took altogether from the abbey £60. It is interesting to note also that in 1538 Abbot Hugh made a grant to another of Henry VIII's associates, probably to forestall disaster. He granted part of an annuity of £10 from the abbey's Berkshire lands to Thomas Wriothesley⁵, later earl of Southampton, who was subsequently to enrich himself considerably by acquiring the dissolved abbeys of Beaulieu and Titchfield (Hampshire). However, the relentless policy of the government could not be thwarted by such grants as these. Cromwell, working through his agents, tried to persuade the abbot to surrender his monastery and when this failed the abbot was apparently put in the Tower. He was very likely there by 17th September, 1539⁶, probably (as will appear) on a charge of treason. In the Tower he may have undergone an incriminating examination at the hands of Cromwell's agents and was eventually sent back to Reading in November for his public trial. It seems that the outcome of the latter was already a foregone conclusion before the abbot's return to Reading, for a surviving note concerning the abbots of Reading and Glastonbury, written by Cromwell himself, reads as follows⁷:

'The abbot of Reading to be sent down to be tried and executed at Reading with his accomplices.
 Counsellors to give evidence against the abbot of Reading, Mr. Hynde and the king's attorney.
 See that the evidence be well sorted and the indictments well drawn.'

Until recently the details of the abbot's trial in Reading were unknown and it was supposed that he had been arraigned partly

on a charge of conspiracy against the government, but a few years ago Dr. J. E. Paul discovered in the Public Record Office the official report of the trial and the indictment with which the abbot was faced⁸. It is now clear that on 13th November 1539 he was tried by a commission of oyer and terminer on a charge of high treason for denying the royal supremacy of the English Church. The Treasons Act of 1534 had made it high treason to deny the Crown any of its titles, including that of Supreme Head of the Church. The abbot was allowed no defence and a sworn jury declared that he was guilty of the charges contained in the indictment. The indictment alleged that the abbot had on three occasions expressed himself against the royal supremacy. For example, in 1536 he had openly and publicly said in English "The king is not supreme head of the Church of England and I trust to see the Pope bear as great a rule in England as ever he did shortly and I will say mass once every week for him". Two clerks, John Enyon and John Rugge, were also found guilty with the abbot. All three were sentenced to the cruel death of a traitor, that of hanging, drawing and quartering, the judges making no exception in the abbot's case, despite his being a lord spiritual of the realm. The exact site of the executions is not known, but it was in, or near, the abbey. According to the French ambassador, Marillac, writing to Francis I on 30th November, the abbot's remains were afterwards strung up in chains⁹. The abbey and its possessions, including the dependent priory at Leominster, escheated to the Crown and the monks were dispersed.

The abbey buildings then entered on a period of secular habitation, while the great Norman church was given over to looting and subsequently became a quarry for freestone and rubble. The Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century wrought further violent destruction upon the fabric. However, it is not the concern of this booklet to trace the fate of the abbey after the dissolution of the monastic life, except to record that, happily, in the nineteenth century a growing respect for the ruins resulted in their acquisition by the Corporation of Reading. It is now possible for the visitor to walk at leisure among the fragmentary remains of the once great abbey - among what the distinguished historian of English monasticism, Dom David Knowles, would describe as "the grey

walls and broken cloisters" which "speak more eloquently of the past than any historian would dare"¹⁰.

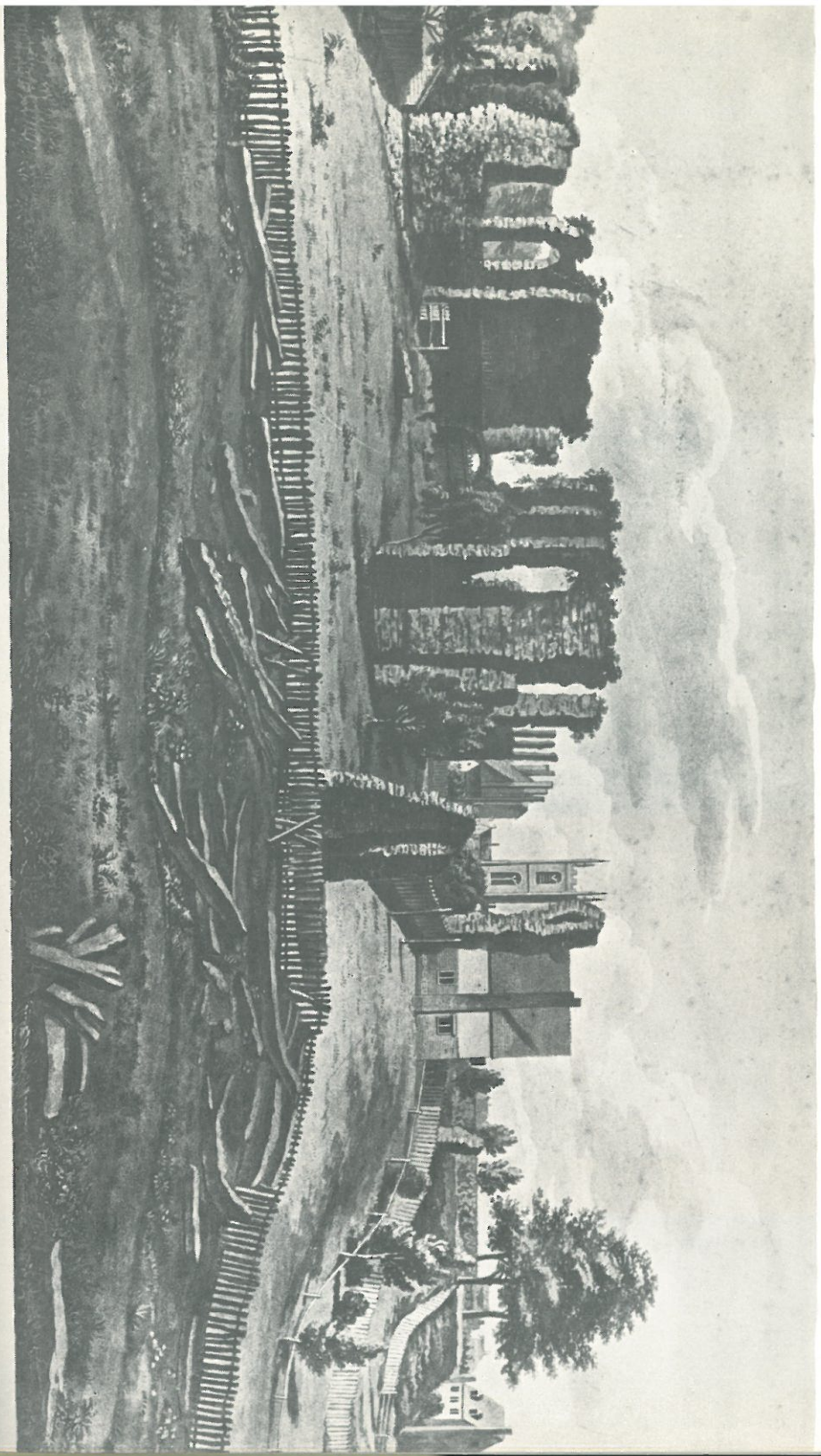
- 1 For the religious changes of this period, see F. E. Hutchinson, 'Cranmer and the English Reformation' (London, 1951).
- 2 'Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII' vol xii part ii p 373.
- 3 Ibid. vol vii p 575.
- 4 The abbey's patent to the two Cromwells is in the Reading Museum (Catalogue no. 45. 51) and is on public display.
- 5 'Catalogue of Ancient Deeds' vol iv D 1279.
- 6 This cannot be proved, but the sequence of known events and contemporary references make it virtually certain that the abbot was lodged in the Tower at this time.
- 7 'Letters and Papers' etc. volxiv part ii p 139.
- 8 Published in 'The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research' 1960.
- 9 'Letters and Papers' etc. volxiv part ii p 214.
- 10 'The Religious Orders in England' vol iii (Cambridge, 1961) p 468.

Plate 6 (opposite)

This view of the ruins of Reading Abbey from the east, 1759, shows (left to right) the chapter house, the vestry, the south transept, and (beyond) the tower of St. Laurence's Church.

The East view of the Ruins of the Abbey of Reading.

W. H. Sturt.



i The lands and churches of Reading Abbey

The more important are indicated thus *. Some possessions were only temporarily in the abbey's hands.

BEDFORDSHIRE

- *Manor in Houghton Conquest
- Money-rent in Shelton

BERKSHIRE

- *Manor, town and churches of Reading
- *Manor and church of Beenham
- *Manor and church of Sulhampstead Abbots
- *Manor and church of Tilehurst (including Theale)
- *Manor and church of Thatcham (with dependent chapelries of Greenham and Midgham)
- *Manor and church of Cholsey
- *Church of Wargrave
- *Manor and church of Bucklebury
- *Manor and church of Pangbourne
- *Manor in East Hendred
- *Manor in Blewbury
 - Land in Windsor Underoure
 - Tenements in Wallingford
 - Land in Stratfield Mortimer
 - Land in Stanford-in-the-Vale
 - Land at Kiddington (in Streatley)
 - Land in Purley
 - Land in Ufton Robert
- *Manor of Ufton Nervet
 - Land in Whitley

Meadow in Ardington
Land at Carswell
Church of St. Rumwald in Wallingford
Land in Sulhampstead Bannister
Rents in Hinton and Sheepbridge
Land in Frilsham
*Manor of Sheffield (in Burghfield)
*Manor and other lands in Burghfield
Annual payment from the church of Compton

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

*Manor in Lenborough
Land in Grendon Underwood
Land in Chesham
Rent in Chearsley

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Tenements in Cambridge
Manor of Southwood (in Doddington)

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

*Annual payment from the churches of
Berkeley Hernesse.
Rent in Boddington

HAMPSHIRE

Tenement in Southampton
Meadow in South Charford
Land in South Warnborough
Rents in Winchester and Boyatt

HEREFORDSHIRE

*Manor and member estates, with mother church
and dependent spiritualities, of Leominster
Tenements in Hereford
Land in Brockmanton
Land in Thornbury
Land in Ford
Manor of La More

HERTFORDSHIRE

*Manor and church of Aston

Land in Sawbridgeworth
Land in Berkhamstead

HUNTINGDONSHIRE

? Annual payment from church of Abbotsley
? Tenement in St. Ives

KENT

* Manor of Windhull (in Hoo)

LEICESTERSHIRE

* Land in Wigston Parva

MIDDLESEX

Tenements in London

NORFOLK

? Rent from the mill of Walton
Rent in Quidenham

OXFORDSHIRE

* Church of Handborough
Land in Stanton Harcourt
* Church of Stanton Harcourt, with chapel of
South Leigh
Land at Lashbrook (in Shiplake)
Land in Sewell
Land in Great Tew
Land in Newnham Murren
Land in Caversham
Land at Bolney (in Harpsden)
Land in Adwell
Tenement and advowson of the church of
St. John Baptist in Oxford

SUFFOLK

Tenement in Dunwich

SURREY

? Manor of Catteshall
Tenement in Guildford

SUSSEX

- *Land in Diddlesfold
- Land in Fernhurst
- Mill of Sutton

WARWICKSHIRE

- *Manor and church of Rowington
- Tenements in Warwick
- Land in Bearley
- Land in Preston Bagot
- Land at Hunscote (in Charlecote)
- Land in Tiddington

Erratum

WILTSHIRE

- *Manor of Whitsbury, and annual payment in incense in lieu of the church.
- Tenement in Marlborough.
- ?Land in Stratton St. Margaret.

SCOTLAND

- *Priory of May (Fifeshire) and dependencies

ii The abbots of Reading

Hugh I	1123-1130
Anscher	1130-1135
Edward	1136-1154
Reginald	1154-1158
Roger	1158-1165
William I	1165-1173
Joseph	1173-1186
Hugh II	1186-1199
Helias	1199-1213
Simon	1213-1226
Adam (of Lathbury)	1226-1238
Richard I (of Chichester)	1238-1262
Richard II (of Reading, alias Bannister)	1262-1269
Robert (of Burgate)	1269-1290
William II (of Sutton)	1290-1305
Nicholas (of Whaplode)	1305-1328
John I (of Appleford)	1328-1342
Henry (of Appleford)	1342-1361
William III (of Dumbleton)	1361-1369
John II (of Sutton)	1369-1378
Richard III (of Yately)	1378-1409
Thomas I (Earley)	1409-1430
Thomas II (Henley)	1430-1445
John II (Thorne I)	1446-1486
John III (Thorne II)	1486-1519
Thomas III (Worcester)	1519-1520
Hugh III (Cook, alias Faringdon)	1520-1539