

ELSTOW ABBEY & CHURCH – A BRIEF HISTORY

ELSTOW ABBEY – THE FOUNDING

It is, at this remove, impossible to give a fully accurate account of the founding of Elstow Abbey. What follows is based on information drawn from the Domesday Book and from other contemporary chronicles and accounts, as well as from more modern and trustworthy studies and sources.

Elstow Abbey was a Benedictine foundation. The Order of St Benedict was one of several “Orders” in the Middle Ages and included such as the Congregation of Cluny, the Cistercians and the Trappists. The Order was exiled from England along with all the others at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (see below), but returned in the 19th Century following John Keble’s famous sermon of 1833 which gave so much impetus to the revivalist Oxford Movement. The Order was noted for its sense of community responsibility in contrast to the more austere and introspective nature of other more contemplative Orders, such as the Franciscans. As the Catholic Encyclopaedia puts it, the aim of St Benedict (480-543) was to institute “*an organization and a set of rules for the domestic life of such laymen as wished to live as fully as possible the type of life presented in the Gospel*”. There are, as at the date of this article, some forty-one active Benedictine institutions in England and many more elsewhere in the world.

The Abbey was founded in 1078 by Judith, Countess of Huntingdon and Northampton, niece of William I, an heiress in her own right in France and widow of the young but powerful Earl Waltheof of Northumbria.

Earl Waltheof had, as a young man, conspired unsuccessfully against William the Conqueror in 1069 and earlier, and as part of William’s subsequent appeasement strategy had, in 1070, been given his niece, Judith of Lens (which is near Arras and was in what was then Normandy) in marriage. In 1072, and as part of William’s on-going strategy, he was awarded the additional earldoms of Northampton and Huntingdon. But three years later, other Earls tried to get him involved in another rebellion. Waltheof refused to join them so the earls demanded that he swear an oath not to betray them. He refused to comply until they told him that, if he would not swear such an oath, they would have to kill him. Waltheof would have regarded this as taking the Lord’s name in vain and his subsequent actions suggest that he may have become consumed with guilt. Waltheof felt unable to tell Judith what had happened and she became suspicious of his secretive behaviour. Seeking Christian forgiveness, Waltheof went to Bishop Lanfranc at Winchester to confess about his swearing the oath and the reason for it. Waltheof must have realised that Lanfranc would be duty bound to tell the king about the plot. Waltheof was subsequently arrested and tried. Judith was called to give evidence at his trial and, in describing his secretive behaviour, may have given the court the impression that she believed that Waltheof was actually involved in the plot.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that Judith had been a material and damning witness against her own rebellious husband in late 1075 or early 1076. We might adduce that she, as William’s niece, was so loyal she couldn’t bear to let her husband get away with treason. Under Norman law, the penalty for treason was banishment and Judith may have believed that this is what William would do to Waltheof. But, after the first uprising of the Earls, Waltheof and the Earls had, as part of their agreement to submit to William, done so after William had agreed that he would rule them under English, rather than Norman, law. The penalty for treason under English law was execution. So, after the trial, William would have had little option but to have Waltheof executed.

Some chroniclers suggest that Waltheof had fact encompassed his own demise by unwisely confiding in Archbishop Lanfranc, who was standing in as regent for an absent William (who at that time was dealing bloodily with recalcitrant barons in Normandy). To confuse things further,

there was also a widely held but dubious theory that Judith's refusal to remarry and her founding of the Abbey at the age of about 24 or 25 were acts of remorse for what the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle claimed that she had done – betrayed her husband.

Legend then turned Waltheof into a Christian martyr, but the veracity of some of those stories is questionable. To the Saxons, the options were simple: either Waltheof was guilty as charged and therefore a Saxon hero as being a member of the anti-William faction, or he was innocent and therefore unjustly executed by the tyrannical new ruler of England. Both options had the potential to create a martyr of him.

After Waltheof died, Judith was allowed by a politically astute William to inherit Waltheof's estates in the Midlands, but not those in the North where his power base had been. This ensured for the king a buffer state between the ever-turbulent northerners and the more pragmatically peaceful southerners.

In 1078, Judith, along with some other like-minded and wealthy people, founded an abbey there.

In the early 1080s, Judith refused William's demand that she remarry, this time to Simon of Senlis, first Earl of Northampton. Judith was promptly stripped of all her titles and possessions in England causing her flee for safety back to Normandy to her birthright properties in Lens in around 1086. What happened to her thereafter is shrouded in the mists of time. In 1090 (after William's death), Judith's eldest daughter, Maud, married Simon.

ELSTOW ABBEY – FROM FOUNDATION TO DISSOLUTION

The Abbey was dedicated to St Mary. Judith was the principal of several patrons and endowed it with property in Elstow, Wilshampstead and Maulden (and possibly Kempston) so as to ensure its financial security. It did, of course, take decades to build.

There are various mentions of the Abbey in the years between its foundation and its dissolution 461 years later. The earliest is Henry I's confirmation charter, granted in about 1126 and on completion of the Abbey's construction. This mentions Maud, Judith's eldest daughter, as being one among several current benefactors, including King Henry himself. In later years, there was mention of various scandals over the not untypical but nonetheless unseemly behaviour of the nuns and of the consequential disciplinary action taken. There are inevitably records of lawsuits one of which even led to Papal intervention before it could be settled.

As an example of how things could spiral out of control, Henry II (1154-1189) granted the nuns of Elstow the right to hold an annual fair, but it was to become so popular, successful and even rowdy that it aroused serious and even violent local opposition. However, the commercial success of the fairs resulted in a need for a lay trade centre; this led to the constructing, some time later, of the fine building known as the The Green House (and then, later, as Moot Hall)which still embellishes the village Green.

The Abbey's main day-to-day duties, in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict, were the singing or reciting of the daily offices, and the sharing of the celebration of the Mass with the laity. The members of the Abbey, and particularly the Abbess, were also closely involved in the supervision of the Abbey's various estates and properties, assets permitted under the Rule, travelling widely in the execution of these duties. (In case you are surprised to read this statement, this was entirely in line with normal Benedictine practice.) The vestigial remains of the once substantial buildings are a mute witness to the Abbey's prominence.

After the break from Rome, which process started in fact before 1530 (the relevant Parliamentary Act, the Act of Supremacy, was in 1534), Henry VIII was particularly badly in need of money. On account of the revenues which perforce would revert to the crown, he caused a small number of the country's religious foundations to be dissolved in 1536 on the technical, but questionable, grounds of "treason" (then, as until recently, a capital offence). In the event, some foundations

preferred to pay fines to avoid, or rather postpone, this fate. The 1536 Act resulted that autumn in a fruitless uprising (the so-called “Pilgrimage of Grace”) and a consequent series of executions which were indiscriminate enough to include several heads of religious houses. This rebellion gave Henry the excuse, if he needed one, in a further Act of 1539 to dissolve the larger and richer houses (the 1536 “ceiling” had been set at the “clear value” figure of £200 income a year). Elstow Abbey, with an annual “clear value” income of £284 12s 11¾d, according to the “*Valor Ecclesiasticus*” commissioned in 1535 by Henry, is recorded in David Baker’s careful study in the late 1960s as being the eighth richest nunnery in England. Some houses, such as the modestly wealthy Elstow preferred to “surrender” rather than go to trial for treason and risk losing everything if – or rather when – the courts decided against them. Elstow Abbey finally “surrendered” on 26th August 1539, thereby allowing the Abbess and 23 remaining Nuns to be granted pensions; £50pa for the Abbess £25pa for the Prioress and £2 pa for each of the 24 inmates.

Within four years of 1536 there were no monastic houses left in the country. [For a fuller picture of the financial status of the Abbey, please see the footnote at the end of this article.]

There was, at this point, a vote carried in Parliament to create a cathedral for Bedfordshire using the now available Elstow site but the motion never received the royal assent hoped for by its sponsor, Bishop Stephen Gardiner of Winchester [see Gilbert Burnet’s “*History of the Reformation of the Church of England*” for a fuller account of this rather sinister man’s life]. Gardiner, before being appointed to the see of Winchester in 1531 had been archdeacon of Bedford.

The Abbey Church survived the Dissolution and it’s more-than-partial destruction in around 1580, leaving a building half its former length for, although the Abbey was closed down, the “laity” of Elstow did not go away, so that there was still a requirement for a Church to serve their needs.

But there remains one loose end to this story. Why is the Abbey Church dedicated not just to St Mary, but also to St Helena, mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great?

The answer lies in the fact that in 1272 a man named Ivota, about whom nothing seems to be known beyond his name, built a Chapel in the grounds of the Abbey and dedicated it to St Helena. This Chapel was subsequently pulled down, although some think that the base of the belltower may be a remaining part of that chapel. This, therefore may be the reason for the dual dedication of the surviving Church; to St Mary as the dedicatee of the Abbey and to St Helena as the dedicatee of the Chapel.

A replica in oak of the Abbey’s Seal, as affixed to the Deed of Surrender, is to be seen placed over the great West Doors of the Church. It depicts the two patron saints. St Mary is holding the Holy Child in her arms, and St Helena has a cross in her hands. Below are figures clearly depicting the pastoral role of the Abbey, with the Abbess, holding a bishop’s crosier, flanked by nuns.

ELSTOW CHURCH – FROM FOUNDATION TO MODERN TIMES

Briefly and so far as the architecture is concerned, there are some notable features. The Church as it has survived comprises just a part of the nave of the Abbey’s original Church, a far bigger building. The earliest surviving section, the three easternmost bays, is Norman or “Romanesque” in style and contemporary with the Abbey’s founding, dating therefore from 1078, although some authorities mention 1075 (which, if true, would indicate a surprisingly early interest by the Countess Judith when it came to founding the Abbey). The two “Early English style” western bays were added later, in around 1225, and are a compromise between Romanesque and the more florid later examples of Gothic to be found elsewhere. The small vestry is contemporary with these two western bays and is a particularly fine example of its kind. The Bell Tower,

dating originally from the 13th century, was restored some 200 years later – this is when the belfry may have been added. It is, today, one of only a few free-standing bell towers in the Country.

In order to rectify the increasing deterioration of the fabric, the Church was most recently substantially restored, starting in 1880.

Inside the Church, there is also much of interest, as in many of the Churches which form our national heritage. Again briefly, here are two principal features:

First of all, it is the Church of the Parish in which John Bunyan (1628-1688) was born, lived and worshipped until his first wife died, young, in 1655 and he moved to Bedford, which is why Elstow is known world-wide as “The Bunyan Parish”. The font in which he was baptised is still in regular use; he played on the village green outside the Church when young; his children by his first wife (Mary?), of whom the eldest - called Mary (d.1674) - was born blind, were also baptised there. Bunyan wrote, in his autobiographical “*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*” (written in Bedford Gaol and published in 1666), about his youth at Elstow with its concomitant crises of conscience and, notably, about his bell ringing days in the “*steeple house*” (he writes of his fear of the great bells falling on his head). The windows of the North and South chapels depict “The Holy War” and “The Pilgrim's Progress” respectively.

A quaint, but reasonably accurate and above all accessible, if rather dated, biography of Bunyan is downloadable, free, from <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/freegrace/library/Bunyan/bunyanbiog.html>. There are, of course, many better-researched learned studies available. Students of John Bunyan will recognise the selectivity of the above reference.

Secondly, Elstow is one of the Churches in England which has a memorial chapel dedicated to the Far East Prisoners of War of the 1939-1945 world conflict (the main national memorial being the Church of Our Lady and St Thomas of Canterbury built in 1952 in Wymondham in Suffolk). It is located in the south aisle, appropriately under the window depicting “The Pilgrim's Progress”. Bunyan, as is well-known, was a prisoner in Bedford gaol for 12 years. The altar dedication reads: “*In memory of those who died in prison camps in the Far East 1941-1945 and in thanksgiving for those who returned...*”. To the left, we read, from the end of the second part of “The Pilgrim's Progress”, Mr Valiant-for-Truth's words: “*My marks and scars I carry with me to be a witness for me that I have fought his battle who now will be my rewarder*”. To the right, we read, from a few lines later and as Mr Valiant-for-Truth crosses the River: “*So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.*”

The Church continues to serve the Parish and to be used for worship; there are services every Sunday with Holy Communion once a week in addition and, of course, baptisms, weddings and funerals plus all the usual activities that one associates with a progressive Church of England parish.

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Footnote

This article owes its existence to many people and sources. These are too numerous to list here. All errors, deductions and conclusions are my own.

However, I am especially indebted to Dr Peter Cunich of the University of Hong Kong, the leading specialist on the topic, for confirming the full details of Elstow's financial situation at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. These details can be summarised as follows:

- a) The Abbey's gross income in 1535-6 was £325 2s 2d. This is a better indication of the Abbey's actual wealth at the time of the dissolution than the net, or “clear value”, figure given in the “*Valor Ecclesiasticus*” of £284 12s 11¾d.

This gross figure was made up from “spiritualities” (impropriated rectories and other ‘pensions’ from churches) at £184 4s 5d and a smaller amount in temporalities (manors, rents etc.) The deductions claimed by the abbey include £22 16s 8d in salaries for vicars of the abbey’s impropriated rectories and various pensions to other ecclesiastical corporation and £17 pa to laymen working as the abbey’s key administrative officials. [For full details, see *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol.4 pp 188-9 (1821 edition).]

- b) Although one of the better-off convents, it was still behind the “clear value” (net) figures given for such as Shaftesbury (£1,166), Barking (£862), Amesbury (£535), Romsey (£393), Wherwell (£339).
- c) Compared with the residents of most smaller nunneries, Elstow’s nuns would have lived comfortable life. The number of sisters at Elstow was quite large so that their standard of life would certainly not have been lavish.
- d) To put all this into a wider context, the wealthiest of the Benedictine monasteries of monks, Westminster Abbey, Glastonbury and Canterbury Cathedral Priory had “clear value” annual income figures in 1535-6 of £3,470, £3,311 and £2,349 respectively.