

## South-East Somerset and its Churches before the Norman Conquest. (Part One)

This paper is intended to discuss the early minster churches in the south-east of Somerset and to make some suggestions about the way in which churches spread to the communities in the area. Some idea of what may have happened may also be useful for understanding the early history of settlements in the area before the Norman Conquest.

### 1. What were the minster churches?

Over the last 40 or 50 years the work on the early history of the church in Anglo-Saxon England has shown that the early church was not much like the pattern we have inherited from the later Middle-Ages (Blair 2005). This should serve as a reminder that the early organisation of the Roman Church in England was intended to fit the social structure of the society within which it worked and that was very different from our own. The important churches in the landscape were not parish churches, which did not exist, but the minsters. In what is now Somerset and Dorset these seem mostly to have been established towards the end of the seventh century and to have consisted of large establishments planted across the landscape in a systematic way. They were relatively few in number and each commanded a considerable tract of countryside for which it provided spiritual services and it looks as if each also commanded considerable resources of land and manpower.

We have called the region within which they exercised their spiritual offices as the *parochia*, to distinguish it from the later and modern parishes. Internally they were organised as monastic or semi-monastic communities of varying sizes, though the monasticism of the seventh and eighth centuries was not much like the reformed monasticism of the tenth century onwards. Communities were not as enclosed as they later became and did not subscribe to a uniform Rule, and it seems likely that the sizes of these establishments varied considerably (Hall 2000; Costen 2011, chap. 9). It is worth mentioning also that these minsters may have had control of the people and other resources in the area which became the *parochia*, but we should be careful of thinking in terms of ownership as we now define it. They certainly had the tithes. The problem for these minsters was that the king clearly regarded their lands as his to use as needed. In this he followed a pattern well established in Gaul under the Merovingian and Carolingian rulers. Consequently the minsters were very vulnerable to loss of land as the king appropriated it for himself,

or more often granted parcels away to his followers and his aristocracy.

For the purposes of this paper we shall consider the minster churches of Northover (Ilchester), Bruton and Milborne Port. Northover was first recorded in 1086 in the Domesday Book (Thorn and Thorn 1980, 15,1), where the church held three hides of land.

It is normal to find minster churches, even in the mid-eleventh century, with considerable lands, the remains of what were once much larger estates. This was the minster church for a wide area. More importantly, it stood on the edge of the large extra-mural Roman period-cemetery of the Roman town of Ilchester. In this it shares characteristics with many much larger and much more famous churches in western Europe, built on the extra-mural graveyards of important Roman cities, often over the tomb of an early martyr. Examples include the monastic Church of St Victor in Marseilles, the church of St Paul in Narbonne and St Sernin (Saturninus) in Toulouse. There is a real possibility that the Anglo-Saxon church at Northover replaced an earlier Old Welsh church. I have discussed its siting close to the river Yeo and suggested that it may have been an important port and trading site in the early Anglo-Saxon period in Somerset - the seventh and eighth centuries (Costen 2011, 148-9).



The Roman town of Ilchester lay in ruins and it is likely that Northover church held most of the land which later became the lands of the town when it was refounded in the tenth century. It was in a dominant position where the navigable river met the Fosse Way and the Roman road to Dorchester. Many other minster sites have also been located on navigable rivers and they were

clearly able to take advantage of the trading opportunities this presented.

Further north lay Bruton. Here the church was not founded on an old Roman site as far as we know. However, it may have been the Anglo-Saxon successor to a church and small late Old Welsh religious community on the nearby Lamyatt Beacon (Costen 2011, 192,196). William of Malmesbury says that that the original church was dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul (Preest 2004, 254).

By the time of the Norman Conquest the church was a collegiate community of canons, probably married, who drew their income from the tithes of their extended parish, which by then was the remaining part of the earlier *parochia*. Bruton and Ilchester were part of a pattern of minsters which provided a geographical coverage of the whole shire - indeed their jurisdictions may have defined the early shire as a unit. They were probably planned and instituted by St Aldhelm, the first Bishop of the new diocese '*be westan wudu*'. The job was finished by the time he died in AD709 or 710.



Milborne Port to the south-east is a peculiar example and may not fit the pattern mentioned above. In 1086 it still had a hide of land and the town of Milborne Port, founded at some point in the tenth century may have been placed inside the original precinct of the minster. I have certainly included it in my early minsters when writing in 2011 (Costen 2011, 193). However, I now consider it likely that Milborne Port has a different origin. It may have started life as the church of the royal estate of Kingsbury, which was recorded as a part of Milborne Port in the post-Conquest period. Kingsbury is an important and interesting place-name. There are actually very few such name sin Great Britain. Only five are extant on the Ordnance Survey index of place-names, one in Warwickshire, one near Brent in Middlesex, one, now lost, close to St Albans in Hertfordshire and in addition, Kingsbury Episcopi in Somerset and Kingsbury in Milborne Port, also in Somerset.

The name means the *burh* of the king, 'the king's stronghold'. A fortified residence was something which the Anglo-Saxon nobleman of the seventh and eighth centuries would normally have. The authors of the Victoria County History of Somerset, suggest that the name is post-conquest (VCH, 7, 138). However, I know of no examples of such a name being formed after the Norman Conquest, by which time 'burh' as a noun was applied only to towns, while the town at Milborne was undoubtedly the town around the church by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It seems more likely that Kingsbury was the royal residence close to Sherborne and that the king gave it a church with many of the accoutrements of a minster. It stood outside the royal burh and it is likely that the place-name now used was coined when the town was founded in the tenth century to distinguish it from the pre-existing 'Kingsbury'.

## 2. What were the *parochiae* like?

Let us begin with Bruton. Bruton in 1086 was a royal estate of 50 ploughlands which had never been hidated (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 1, 9). This was a large estate which had probably started as a large minster estate and which still had dependent chapels in the post-Conquest period at Redlynch, Pitcombe and Wyke Champflower. Redlynch was a separate manor in 1086 and had been in 1066. It was a four hide estate held by Bretel from the count of Mortain (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 19, 58). Its church was dedicated to Saint Peter and so probably pre-dated the Conquest. The estate had clearly been alienated from the Bruton royal estate at some point in the later Anglo-Saxon period, perhaps the tenth century, but the church of Bruton had retained the tithes and other rights. Wyke Champflower, on the other hand had a chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity, but was still part of Bruton in 1086. Pitcombe had also been lost to the Bruton estate by 1066. It was a five hide estate which had been held by Alfwold in 1066 (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 36,1). Whoever had owned the property in the tenth or early century had been important enough to maintain control of 11 burgesses in Bruton who paid a rent totalling 23 shilling per year to Pitcombe. Its chapel was dedicated to St Leonard, the patron saint of hunters and an appropriate dedication for a church near the Selwood forest. However, Leonard was unknown in England before the Conquest. He was a local saint from Noblac, near Limoges. As well as hunters he was a patron of prisoners and pregnant women. His cult became popular after a visit to his shrine by Bohemond, Prince of Antioch who was released from a Moslem prison in 1103 and made a pilgrimage to St Leonard as thanks to the saint for his aid. The church is therefore likely to be twelfth century.

We can see therefore how a large estate broke up at the peripheries as pieces were carved out and given or sold to favoured *ministri*. What they were receiving were almost certainly existing communities in most cases, but it is likely that if we go back further, into the later seventh century and most probably the eighth century, this process may well have been in progress even then. Brewham, to the east of Bruton was an independent estate in 1066 held by Robert son of Wymarc (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 25,55). It had an attachment of three hides in 1066 which had been split off by 1086. The Domesday Book also tells us that Witham Friary had been part of Brewham until the Conquest (ibid. 21,90). It seems likely that Brewham along with Witham was originally part of the royal hunting ground of Selwood and therefore part of the Bruton *parochia* and estate, but had been developed and split off before 1066. Another three hides post-Conquest had been taken from Brewham, probably forming a further estate post-Conquest.

On the eastern side of Bruton there is a group of estates which by 1066 all belonged to Glastonbury Abbey; Ditchheat, Lamyatt and Hornblotton. There is a charter, S. 292, dated 842 by which Æthelwulf, the king of Wessex granted an estate of 30 hides, 25 at Ditchheat and five at Lottisham. The land went to the ealdorman Eanwulf and despite the abbey's claims it probably came to them via a grant in the tenth century, after the refoundation of the monastery (Abrams 1996, 109-10). In 1066 the estate at Ditchheat also included Hornblotton and Lamyatt (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 8,30). Lamyatt is only mentioned in a lost charter from the Glastonbury Landboc. This claims to have been a grant of Lamyatt by King Eadwig to a man called Cynric and this would have been between 955 and 959 (Abrams 1996, 152). If this is true it seems likely that Lamyatt had either remained under royal control during the ninth and tenth centuries to be granted in the mid-tenth to a layman who then gave it to Glastonbury. It is possible that all this land was once part of the *parochia* and estate of Bruton, but was lost when the king granted it away in the mid-ninth century or kept it himself.

Hornblotton may have been lost at an even earlier date, since the name means the 'tun of the hornblower', presumably the man who blew the hunting horn when the king hunted in the forest. This sort of grant, made to a hunting servant of the king probably meant that the king had an hereditary hornblower and that he and his descendants held Hornblotton long enough for the name to stick fast. The story is not straightforward however, since there is a boundary clause attached to the charter which sets out the bounds of Ditchheat and Lottisham as two separate estates,

although they were both inside the same parish, suggesting that Glastonbury had founded the church for its two contiguous estates, probably therefore in the tenth century. The boundary clauses are probably also tenth century, rather than ninth and reflect a time before Hornblotton and Lamyatt became attached. Some skulduggery to lighten the tax burden may be guessed at. These estates may always have been on the periphery of the *parochia* and already leased to laymen and so vulnerable to encroachment.

To the north of Lamyatt Beacon, Batcombe, with its dependency Spargrove, was also Glastonbury land and also has a charter, S. 462. This really does seem to have passed to Glastonbury in the tenth century. The charter is dated to 940 when King Edmund gave the land to Ælfsige, his relative and official and from him it seems to have passed to Ælfheah the ealdorman of Hampshire and so to his wife, Ælswith. At her death it passed to Glastonbury. Clearly this was already an independent estate in the tenth century and under the king's control, but again may have started as part of the Bruton *parochia*. To the south of Bruton places like Charlton Musgrove and Shepton Montague clearly betray their dependent status, but we can only speculate about the evolution of places like Cary and Ansford. All the places mentioned above have solidly middle of the road dedications, any of which could have been given before the Norman Conquest. Ditchheat is dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, Lamyatt to Saints Mary and John - this may be a case of a dedication being added when the church was rebuilt at some point. Hornblotton was dedicated to St Peter, Batcombe to St Mary and its dependency, Spargrove chapel to St Lawrence.

Michael Costen

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