

The Bowdon Sheaf

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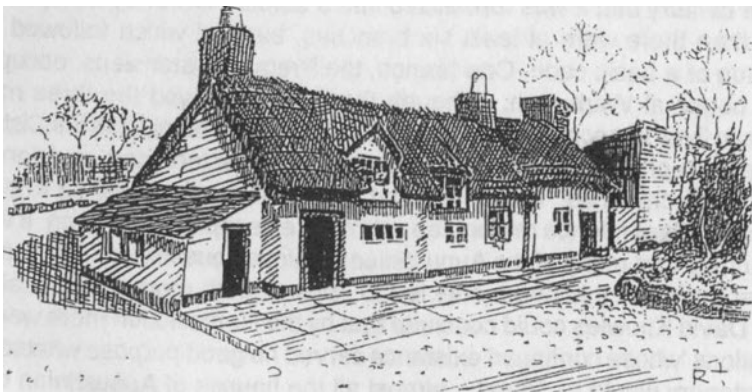
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*A Dunham Massey Longhouse
Circa 1945*

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Mobberley Priory **by Stephen Matthews**

HISTORY

This Priory has attracted little attention, for example, the ecclesiastical volume of the Victoria County History of Cheshire gives it no more than a few lines (Vol III, p. 124). We do not know for certain when it was founded or for how long it survived. We know that it was founded by Patrick de Mobberley before 1208 as a house of regular Augustinian canons and it had been appropriated by Rocester Abbey in Staffordshire by the middle of the century. It has generally been inferred that it was situated in the church at Mobberley but unfortunately the surviving masonry gives no indication whether that was literally true and the main fabric of the building is later, of a typical Cheshire design (Richards 1973. p. 238). Aerial photography and excavation might provide an answer but both are difficult on religious sites. We need not, however, think too much about elaborate conventional buildings for the establishment must have been small and the canons could well have operated within the church, subject to only minor re-arrangements such as perhaps more altars. Their residence would probably be a relatively simple structure attached to the church or a little way away.

The Augustinian Order had evolved from loose groups of clerics who followed a regime set out by St Augustine of Hippo, and it was not until the mid twelfth century that it was formalised into a defined Order by a Papal decree. Even then there were at least six branches, each of which followed its own variation of a basic code. One branch, the Premonstratensians, occupied the small house at Warburton. Although the canons obeyed the three monastic vows and lived in a community, they were not cloistered monks like the Cistercians, but played a practical role in society, undertaking pastoral care and serving the local parish churches. This could lead to tension for they wished to preserve their own independence rather than submit to episcopal supervision. It was also unfortunate that many of the Augustinian religious houses were also among the smaller ones, for this commonly led to abuses, both moral and fiscal so that Dom. David Knowles could conclude that by the Reformation there were many institutions 'whose continued existence served no good purpose whatsoever. In this category would be found ...almost all the houses of Augustinian canons.' The cause was that founders, and their families, frequently regarded their foundations as family property where relations could be placed and where tax exemptions could be enjoyed; fortunately, perhaps, Mobberley's absorption by Rocester spared it from Dom. Knowles' harsh judgement.

Ormerod dated the transfer to Rocester in the decade before 1240 on the slender argument that one of the witnesses to the appropriation document was Richard de Coudray who was presented to the church of West Kirkby by Abbot Walter of Chester, who died in 1240. Presumably his reasoning was that after that date, Richard would not be available as a witness, but that does not follow. Higham put the date at about 1250, though he gave no grounds (Higham 2000, p.70) but the document granting the Priory to Rocester makes it more likely that the terminal date was the year beginning October 1237, for one of the witnesses was D(omi)no Richard de Draycote who was Justiciar in that year. This date is compatible with Ormerod's.

PATRICK

We know little of Patrick. He must have been a man of some substance at county level for he witnessed charters which, to judge by the other witnesses, must have been issued in Chester at Earl Ranulf's 'court'. He attested second after the Justiciar Philip de Orby to William fitz Rad. de Mobberley's charter. He attested the charter of Richard fitzWarin de Tatton, in fourth place. His name was first in two charters of Petronilla and her husband Alan, but the absence of senior figures suggests that they may not have been issued in Chester. He had an interest in all of these but his familiarity with official circles is indicated also by his appearance as a witness to Philip of Orby's grant of Goostrey to St. Werburgh's in 1192-1208 (Tait 1920, no. 541).

THE CHARTERS

Lack of interest in the Priory is surprising because its history is evidenced by no fewer than twenty-seven charters, which certainly or probably relate to it. The foundation charter itself has been lost and we have to presume that the two saltworkings (salinas) in Northwich that Patrick de Mobberley acquired were passed on by him to the Priory, that is the assumption that Ormerod and everyone since him has made. What do the charters tell us?

It is clear from them that the Priory's demise was not due to a fault in the foundation charter as is sometimes said. Even if that had been so, other donations followed to add to its possessions. Apart from the two saltworkings which Patrick himself had acquired, another two followed, given directly by other members of the same family from Millington. Patrick must have given rights in the church and lands at Mobberley as well, for his brother Augustine issued a charter of confirmation. It would seem that a very determined attempt was made to put the Priory on a sound legal footing for confirmations were also obtained from other family members and superior lords. All this must have cost a great deal, for two charters were certainly issued at Chester, and another four probably were, one was probably issued in Manchester (or Salford) whilst attendance would have been needed at Lichfield for the Bishop's Licence. It is of course possible that those not stated to be at Chester could have been issued elsewhere as Rannulfs 'court' moved around the country but although that might reduce the cost most of the legal overheads would remain.

THE WITNESSES

We can learn a little from the witness lists about the sequence of gifts, if not their absolute date. Not only the original gift by Patrick but a subsequent donation by Richard fitzWarren de Tatton (Ormerod's, no. 11) must have been made before 1208 for both were included in the confirmation by Earl Rannulph whose first witness was Rannulf de Mesnilwaring who ceased to be Justiciar and presumably died in that year. The same witnesses link no. 1, by Cristina Punterlin, and no. 2 by Aitrop de Millington to much the same time. Another group can be dated before 1229 since they were witnessed by Philip de Orby who was Justiciar until that year. No. 23 can probably be dated to 1228, for two of the first three witnesses were signatories to the concord that settled the dispute within the Venables family in August of that year (Barraclough 1953, pp.31-33). Nos. 26 and 27 must have been made together because with the exception of an additional priest in the latter, the witness lists are identical.

We have, then, a priory soundly established, at least in terms of legal title to its assets, which was appropriated to Rocester Abbey in Staffordshire probably about thirty years after foundation. Rocester was another Augustinian House on the Dove between Ashbourne and Uttoxeter, which had been founded about 1146 by Richard Bacon, a nephew of the Earl of Chester. It was not well endowed and its buildings were probably modest, for the earthworks which mark its site are thought to be post-medieval. In 1300 Rocester obtained a Papal confirmation of its possessions which included its interests in Mobberley, though not necessarily the Priory as a going concern but simply its property interests. It is probable that the group of canons was disbanded and a vicar installed. Rocester appears to have lost its ownership during the next two hundred years, for Mobberley did not appear amongst its possessions at the Dissolution in 1538.

WHY THE APPROPRIATION?

So much for fact and it is extremely unlikely that we will ever know any more. We can, however, speculate a little further to consider why Rocester should have been interested in acquiring such a small and separated possession. There were not many Augustinian houses and that may have provided some attraction; it would certainly have made appropriation easier. Rocester had been founded by a nephew of the Earl of Chester and it retained a Cheshire perspective for a John, chaplain of Rocester was a witness to Gilbert's charter no. 24 and later William de Rocester was one of the monks sent to the king in 1249 to seek approval for their election of a new abbot. St Werburgh's in its turn, retained lands at Rocester (Tait 1920 no. 61).

Neither of these reasons is likely to provide the answer on its own, and the reason for the takeover is more likely to be a mixture of personal and economic interests. As for personal motive, Gilbert de Barton was the son of Patrick's daughter and William de Norton, one of the other donors. His own interests appear to have lain elsewhere; he also gave property to Cockersand Abbey, Lancashire and his clerical witnesses suggested a wider clerical circle. He was patron of a house that was probably peripheral to his interests and was too small to survive for long as an independent entity. Amalgamation with another house of the same Order would provide a better future for the various donors' intentions, even at the price of losing the foundation itself.

Economically, there was in fact a good deal of logic in the appropriation. Mobberley must have been a small house, supporting only a handful of canons at most but it was not necessarily poor. Whilst there may be uncertainty over what precisely Patrick gave in the first instance, in addition to its rights in Mobberley it subsequently acquired land and a mill at Tatton and it probably had a share in, if not all of, the revenues of the church itself. We may note that one of the documents (Ormerod, no. 22) records the purchase rather than the gift of property; Henry fitz William de Castello transferred all his land in Stainilliscroft for a cash payment of three marks of silver and an annual rent of twelve pence per annum. This is important for it indicates that the Priory was running at a profit, or at least had spare cash. In addition to these conventional assets, Mobberley had another source of income, which may have put it in quite a different category. If we accept the assumption that Patrick gave it his two saltworkings in Northwich, and it was later given shares in two more, it must have held a significant industrial asset. Admittedly, it had to pay sub-rents of various amounts to the donors but it would only be worth giving it the workings if there were a worthwhile profit after these rents had been paid. That profit would be a useful addition to Rocester's revenues and might well provide the explanation for its acquisition of a relatively distant possession. Rocester was itself a small house and its own survival may have been precarious. What it would need to improve its own position would be another house, with significant assets but little in the way of liabilities. From what we know of Mobberley it satisfied both these requirements and forms an interesting example of monastic investment in industry rather than agriculture.

If we put the two motives together, the result was an ideal solution. Patrick rid himself of an unwanted responsibility and Rocester gained a profitable asset. The donors' intentions were not to provide a beautiful or romantic building for future generations to admire, but to ensure the good of their souls after death. That could be best served by amalgamating the assets of two modest houses even at the price of losing the physical presence of one of them.

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NARPAC: A Wartime Memory by Ronald Trenbath

In 1940 the British Government introduced the Harvesting Scheme whereby older schoolchildren and students were encouraged to help with harvesting on farms which were short handed and many local teenagers eagerly joined it.

In the final stages of the corn harvest that year an air raid on the precision instrument factories in Broadheath caused large oil containers to explode to be followed by some horrendous night bombing after which most of the teenagers also volunteered to join the civil defence.

This caused problems for the Chief Warden who realized that inexperienced under age participants could cause more problems than they could solve, but enthusiasm among future personnel had to be encouraged. In order to resolve the problem these volunteers were invited to attend talks on first aid and on the work and running of the Civil defence and also to act as casualties in training exercises, this involved standing in a given position with a luggage label attached to clothing on which was written the nature of the injuries and in due course wardens would proceed to take all necessary actions, such as bandaging, fixing splints & arranging for stretcher bearers, after which doctors would assess the results and subject the wardens to oral tests. Unfortunately over excited wardens on one occasion dropped a stretcher and the occupant be- came a real casualty, so volunteers became less enthusiastic about participating as casualties.

Later, more senior participants were allowed to become Fire Guards to assist the National Fire Service (NFS) in dealing with minor fires and were involved, among other activities, in being instructed in the use of sand bags and stirrup pumps and the manning of fire appliances. I was given the task of drawing a rough sketch map of the area and of marking on it hydrant points, assembly positions and any other items of importance; and also of checking daily that those who were on rosta duty were aware of their times of duty.

Mayors and Councillors often attended exercises to the annoyance of wardens who considered them to be interfering and pompous and they were greatly embarrassed when a Senior Fire Officer was sprayed in the face by an over enthusiastic fire guard pointing a stirrup pump in the wrong direction.

Eventually I was invited to join NARPAC, a branch of Civil Defence which the government was keen to develop, few had heard of it then, and few remember it now, but those in power treated it very seriously. It was explained to me that morale in the cities most targeted by the enemy, such as Coventry and London, was deteriorating very alarmingly due to civilians being worried by the fate of their pets, particularly lonely people such as women separated from their husbands and families, and that an order had been given at a very high level to set up the National Air Raid Precautions for Animals Committee to deal with the problem and that a local branch had to be formed immediately.

Delighted to be involved in this work I was pleased when the appointed leader came to organize the group. A tall, slim woman dressed in tweeds and wearing brogues arrived, taking long strides, with dogs to heel, and addressing everyone in a very loud booming voice. We soon nicknamed her 'Doggy'. Suggesting that we commenced work straight away, and satisfied with their response, she declared everything to be 'Jolly good' and the group was thus formed.

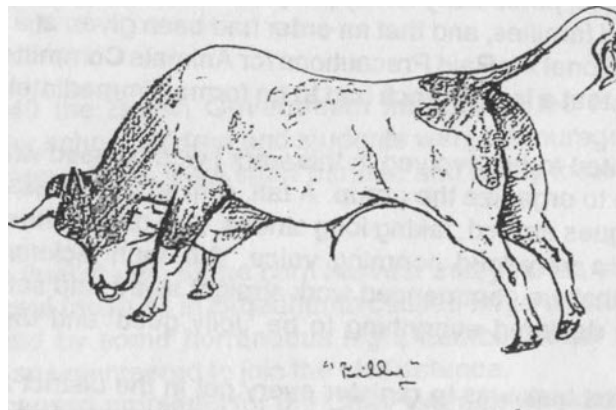
Our first task was to register every pet in the district and issue identity discs but we were told to only deal with pets as the farm animals were covered by the War Agricultural Committee. The registration was very time consuming as we had to listen to the histories and anecdotes of all the pets concerned and we soon discovered that every pet in Cheshire was a 'caution', to use the local vernacular.

The next task was to receive instruction from Veterinary Surgeons on animal first aid and to be shown how to muzzle, bandage and render initial treatment to injured dogs and cats using patients brought for the purpose. Pet lovers being generally gregarious, our sessions always ended on light hearted notes.

As the war progressed, and local attention from the enemy diminished, so our activities became confined to exercises and we were never called upon to demonstrate our skill, except for dealing with a rabbit affected by car fumes who, after gentle heart massage and a whiff of oxygen soon regained good health, but the instruction did come in useful later in treating pets in my care (dogs, cats and goats) for minor injuries, real or imagined.

One incident might be recorded when we disobeyed instructions and dealt with an escaped bull. Armed with pikels we followed him on bicycles along the lanes of Dunham Massey eventually persuading him to return home to White House Farm where his owner, Nathaniel Priestner warmly thanked us but warned us not to be too foolhardy. However we knew Billy the bull to be a gentle docile creature who enjoyed plenty of food, a comfortable loose box, job satisfaction and always appeared contented with life.

If these memories appear to be in the league of the television series 'Dad's Army' I would emphasize that during serious incidents such as the bombing of Broadheath the local Civil Defence personnel acted with the bravery, efficiency and dedication to be found everywhere in the country during the war.



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