

Monasteries in Somerset

Mick Aston

Origins

While we can be reasonably sure when Christianity was adopted as a religion in Somerset (Thomas 1981) it is much more difficult to know when monasticism was established.

Finds of archaeological material which is undoubtedly early Christian show us that there were Christians in Somerset in the late Roman period. The mausoleum at Wells, the predecessor of the later churches and cathedrals demonstrates the structural evidence we can expect (Aston and Burrow 1982b).

The problem with early monasticism is that we are not sure of what the archaeology of such sites would look like and the chronology is debatable. There are a number of possible scenarios. It is likely that there were early monasteries or communities of hermits in Somerset, rather like others we see in the western Church, and these could date to the later fifth and sixth centuries. Such sites existed in Ireland, in nearby southern Wales at Caerwent, Llantwit Major (the former Llanilltud Fawr) and Llancarfan, and probably in Devon and Cornwall. Philip Rahtz's work at Glastonbury Tor (Figure 16.1) suggests a site of this type and Carhampton may be another but it is difficult to point to others in the county at this date (Rahtz 1993). It is probable that our ideas are too heavily influenced by later monasticism; there is no clear reason why monasteries should be necessarily distinguishable from high status secular sites at this time, though it would help if we had inscribed stones, crosses, reliquaries, bells, croziers and so on! It is possible, for example, that at some time the enclosure of Cadbury at Congresbury (Rahtz *et al.*



Figure 16.1: Air photograph of Glastonbury Tor. The excavations near the church tower on the summit indicate a probable early hermit settlement.

1992, 250) could have had a monastic element, with a possible later move downhill to the church site, associated with St Cynog (Bowen 1977).

Can we identify any other candidates for early monasteries or hermit sites? Somerset, between Wales and Brittany, close to Cornwall, and with extensive marshes with islands and numerous caves in the uplands would seem to be a good candidate with a landscape ideal for hermits in hermitages. They *may* have existed but we have no evidence as yet. Whether there were any larger monastic estab-



Figure 16.2: *The site of Bruton Abbey. St Aldhelm founded a monastery here and there was a Benedictine house here in the Middle Ages.*

lishments at this early date (c.450–c.650) is perhaps unlikely – there are no probabilities suggested in later documentation.

We are perhaps on firmer ground in the seventh and eighth centuries. Whatever the “conquest” of Somerset by “Anglo-Saxons” consisted of in the seventh century we can see the definite influence of the Roman church with St Aldhelm, as abbot of Malmesbury, then as first bishop of Sherborne (Dorset) in 705 who died at Doulling in Somerset in 709. He is said to have founded monasteries at Bruton (Figure 16.2), probably at Frome and possibly at Doulling. We assume that the parish churches at these places mark the sites of these monasteries but there is not a shred of archaeological evidence for this.

The seventh century was the great period for founding monasteries, following the conversion of the Saxon parts of England to Christianity (Aston 1993b). Bath is said to have been founded around 676 as a nunnery (in all probability at this date a mixed house of monks and nuns under an abbess) and Muchelney possibly in 693 (Knowles and Hadcock 1971). There is also no reason why the main site at Glastonbury, below the Tor, could not have been developed at the same period, with the earlier “celtic” establishment on the Tor being replaced by a more fashionable Roman-style layout on the extensive lowland site nearby. If we did not have the later legendary accounts to confuse us this is what we would expect – Glastonbury would then be another example (like Ely, Abingdon, Worcester and so on) of the extensive lowland Anglo-Saxon sites. We know little about these monasteries from their

archaeology; there must be much to learn at Glastonbury for this period, despite the extensive earlier excavations (Aston and Leech 1977, 63).

From the seventh century, if not earlier, we should expect the provision of churches at the centres of major estates in the county. We would expect the monasteries discussed above to establish churches on their estates; as Christianity gained ground as the state religion we would expect the royal estates to be provided with churches.

The churches, the “minsters” of the current literature (Blair 1988; Blair and Sharpe 1992) are difficult to define and even more difficult to demonstrate archaeologically. Current research tries to define a hierarchy of churches – looking for subsidiary status with churches and chapels to a central minster. This seems to work in many cases drawing our attention in Somerset (Aston 1986) to Chew Magna, North Petherton, South Petherton, Taunton, Chewton Mendip and Bruton as potentially important and perhaps early, minsters. Analysis of early estates, admittedly usually from later documentation, reinforces the idea that these are the main centres, the focal places, in the Saxon landscape.

We do not know what these sites would have looked like and how they would have operated as religious centres in detail. The contemporary documentation is unhelpful and misleading – the terms used, *monasteria*, *ecclesia*, etc, can mean anything from a fully developed monastery, such as we assume at Bath, Glastonbury or Muchelney, to a church with a group of priests – probably most minsters were like the latter.

With the Viking raids from the late eighth century onwards and the terrible disruption of the ninth century, full monasticism seems to have been extinguished in England. But minster churches and clergy must have continued to serve the populace. Our problem with the eighth and ninth centuries in Somerset as elsewhere, is we have no structural evidence (Taylor and Taylor 1965), few sculptural fragments (Foster 1987), few finds of a religious type for this period (such as reliquaries, bells, burials etc) and there have been no excavations on any minster site in the county. Along with the tenth century monasteries, these sites are the most neglected in British archaeology – our knowledge of them in Somerset is as dark as it is elsewhere.

Monasticism must have been at a very low ebb in southern England by the reign of Alfred the Great (to 899). He founded the nunnery at Shaftesbury in



Figure 16.3: *Glastonbury Abbey. The ruins of one of the greatest and most wealthy of the abbeys of the Middle Ages in England.*

Dorset (for his daughter Aethelgifu) and Athelney in the Somerset marshes for monks in 888. At the latter he had difficulty in recruiting men willing to undertake the monastic life, as Asser tells us (Keynes and Lapidge 1983), so whether the community survived, following the full monastic regime, until the refoundation of many monasteries in the mid tenth century must remain uncertain.

The site chosen for Athelney abbey was on the island in the fen where there had been a hermitage and which Alfred had used as a guerrilla base in his campaign against the Danes. A geophysical survey carried out in 1994 established the layout of the medieval monastery on the hill top, around the Victorian monument (Aston 1995, 33). William of Malmesbury's description suggests an earlier church with a central square surrounded by four apses, rather like Germigny des Pré in the Loire Valley, and this may have been sited at the east end of the ridge where part of the later monastic church has a building on a different alignment. The context of the site would certainly repay further investigation both archaeologically and in its local landscape context. How many other islands in the

Levels in Saxon times had hermitages? How many were never recorded or lie behind the later references to chapels at such places. Did, for example, Nyland (*Andredese* – St Andrew's Island), Marchey (*Martinsey* – St Martin's), or Oath in Aller, as well as the better known Beckery and Sprawlesmede (later Burtle) have hermits at this time?

Athelney seems to have been chosen because it was on the edge of the royal estate at North Petherton, rather like Muchelney seems to have been at the north-west edge of the Martock estate. Should we expect other hermitages to be located in "liminal" situations with regard to the early estate structure of the county? (Aston 1986, fig. 7.4).

In the mid-tenth century a great change took place which we can now see as the beginning of medieval monasticism in England which was to last through to the Dissolution in the 1530s – the best part of six hundred years. Glastonbury Abbey was refounded by Dunstan in 940 (Figure 16.3); this was followed by Bath c.963, Athelney c.960, Muchelney c.959 (Knowles and Hadcock 1971); Wells had become the cathedral for the county with a college of canons in 909.

What did these monasteries look like? We know a little about Muchelney where a pre-conquest crypt (of very debatable date) remains but we only know the general position of the church at Bath. At Glastonbury the extensive excavations by Raleigh Radford and others have never been fully published so the detailed evidence is not readily available for the reconstructions that have been produced. It does seem however that from the tenth century there was a cloister with buildings around it south of the church.

We can gain a great deal of information about the economic structure that supported these monasteries from the entries for Domesday Book (1086). In common with other tenth-century refoundations elsewhere in the country, these Somerset monasteries had accumulated great areas of land in the century or so before 1066 (Thorn and Thorn 1980). Michael Costen (1992b) has shown how Glastonbury built up its estate from a number of centres at Wrington, Banwell, Brent, Shapwick and so on in the tenth century into a great tract of land spreading across the centre of the county a hundred years later. The other houses did the same on a smaller scale.

Never again were so few monastic houses going to accumulate so much wealth as these refoundations did in the period 960 to 1066. These anciently founded Benedictine communities were always the largest institutions with the most monks, the greatest incomes and the most extensive lands. After the Norman Conquest dramatic changes took place: more monasteries were founded but they had fewer monks, nuns and so on, and were endowed with fewer and smaller estates (Aston 1995).

Firstly there were the additions of new houses directly related to existing French monasteries connected with the Norman Conquerors. One of the first Cluniac priories, dependent on Cluny in Burgundy, was founded in Somerset at Montacute. We know little about its archaeology; there are slight earthworks, probably of its cloister and surrounding buildings – a recent geophysical survey also proved inconclusive. The history suggests that the present parish church replaced one taken over by monks. The most likely position for this is the large earthwork overlain by the south wall of the churchyard. This has never been investigated. The outline of the precinct can be worked out from the boundaries and patterns in the townscape at Montacute; the fine late medieval gatehouse (probably the inner gatehouse) is the main surviving feature.

Generally few monasteries were founded by the first generation of Normans in England. They preferred to donate estates to Norman monasteries back home in Normandy. These foreign monasteries often established “priors” or “cells” on the manors granted to them; few of these have left much trace and we should not expect to find sites with fully developed claustral plans. Stogursey, as a priory of Lonlay on the borders of Normandy and Maine, remains as a spectacular example of one of these alien establishments with its large cruciform church formerly with three eastern apses and with decoration which would not be out of place in Anjou or Poitou.

The greatest post-Conquest movement however was certainly in the creation of priories of canons – generally following the Augustinian rule. Over two hundred of these were founded in England and Wales (Robinson 1980) and every county (except Dorset!) has at least one or two examples. There are a lot in Somerset of various types.

The Augustinian canons with their flexible rule were ideal people to replace the secular clergy of the old Anglo-Saxon minsters. This seems to have happened at Taunton with the resiting and refoundation of the monastery, probably by Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester, along with other developments at the town (the development of the castle, town fortifications and so on, Bush and Aston 1984) outside the town defences on the north-east side. The same probably happened at Bruton and at Keynsham. The latter was a member of the Victorine congregation (from St Victor in Paris) which had a group of houses in the west country including two others, Stavordale and Woodspring, in Somerset. The canons were often studious and at the last two sites seem to have sought out locations, in Selwood and in a remote coastal area, more appropriate to hermits or the more austere of the newer orders.

There are well-preserved remains of buildings and earthworks at both Woodspring and Stavordale and there have been good quality excavations at Taunton (Leach 1984a), admittedly in some outer part of the priory precinct. The important excavations at Keynsham have been briefly published (Lowe 1987). No published work has been carried out at Bruton; even the exact site is not really known though it is almost certainly under the playing fields of Bruton school where the post-medieval mansion seems to have been.



Figure 16.4: *Hinton Charterhouse. The well-preserved remains of the thirteenth century charterhouse. To the left is the chapter house, beyond is the refectory. In the foreground is the site of the church.*

There was a small Augustinian house at Barlynch on the important royal estate at Brompton. This could have developed from a hermitage; Burtle in the Levels certainly did, though there are no remains left and little archaeological work has been carried out.

The greatest development of the twelfth century, both here and in other counties was however the founding of a number of houses of the new monastic orders which had developed in France from the late eleventh century onwards (Aston 1995). Following the Gregorian reforms, the outburst of religious zeal and asceticism by a group of founders resulted, eventually, in the foundation of great “families” of monasteries influenced by and dependent on a mother house back in France.

The first of these, the Carthusians, founded from La Grand Chartreuse in the French Alps (Aston 1993a) had only relatively little impact in Britain though the first two houses were founded in Somerset, at Witham and Hinton. Enough archaeological research has been carried out to say quite a lot about these sites. At Witham a fine set of

earthworks remain, though these mainly relate to post-medieval gardens on the site (Wilson-North and Porter 1997). A geophysical survey however defined the great cloister, the position of the cells and the church and little cloister buildings. This has clarified the earlier excavations, carefully reassessed by the Burrows (Burrow and Burrow 1990). The lower houses for the lay brothers was at Witham Friary (really *frereie* – the brothers) where the fine twelfth-century vaulted church remains. The estate can be reconstructed in Selwood Forest together with the holdings on Mendip including the important grange at Charterhouse.

At Hinton (Figure 16.4) well-preserved buildings remain from the thirteenth century – a rare survival even in European terms. These include the refectory, the chapter house with part of the church and little cloister and the gatehouse inside the later mansion on the site. Again there are earthworks which we know, from Fletcher’s superficial excavations, reflect the layout of the great cloister and cells. Another superb geophysical survey of the site clarifies all this detail as well as showing another court with what are prob-

ably additional cells. The earthwork survey shows post-medieval gardens with mounds and ponds west of the monastery. Little research has been carried out on the estates. The charterhouse was founded in a park; the lower house was at Friary (sic) a mile away and there was a grange on Mendip at Green Ore.

Somerset was already well-endowed with older-established monasteries which held a great deal of land by the middle of the twelfth century. The bishop of Bath and Wells also held extensive estates in the county. There was therefore little room for more houses of the other new orders (Cistercian, Premonstratensian, Gilbertine and so on) in the county. Only one Cistercian monastery was founded, at Cleeve in 1198, although Forde, just over the border in Dorset, held a lot of land in the south of the county (Hobbs 1998).

Cleeve has the remains of superb claustral buildings, only lacking the church and the west range. There have been recent English Heritage inspired excavations (Guy 1988), though the earthworks do not seem ever to have been systematically surveyed and no geophysical survey has been carried out to locate, for example, the infirmary complex, which must presumably be to the south east of the remaining buildings. There is a fine gatehouse, the outline of the precinct can be defined by a wall, moats/fishponds and streams. The estates stretched from the coast to Brendon Hill, mainly in the parish of Old Cleeve and the granges are known from research by the Victoria County History editors (Dunning 1985).

The county had a number of nunneries, which like elsewhere, were poor, have left few remains and have been little studied. There were Benedictine nuns established at Cannington and Barrow Gurney although at neither has there been any archaeological (or even building recording) research as far as is known. At Durston, however, Minchin Buckland Priory was an extraordinary site which has had at least some survey and appraisal of the remains (Burrow 1985). The house had a complex history which will have resulted in a complicated but fascinating archaeology.

It began as a house for Augustinian Canons around 1166 but the community was dispersed by 1180. It was then granted to the Knights Hospitaller provided they accommodated all the sisters here who had lived in other establishments elsewhere. A large preceptory with a separate chapel

was established near the sisters' buildings. There were thus two monasteries with a church in each. We should expect two cloisters and two sets of buildings. At one time there must have been nuns, sisters, canons, lay brothers, chaplains, clerks, corrodians, officials and servants in this complex. Today a large early nineteenth-century house stands on the site and there were fine fishponds nearby.

The last fling of medieval monasticism was the foundation of the friaries from the thirteenth century onwards. Somerset was not well endowed with these; it had many small rural towns but no great urban centres, which the various groups of friars favoured. There was a house of Franciscan (grey) friars outside the town defences at Bridgwater and Dominican (black) friars at Ilchester. Nothing remains of either house and little is known, though some excavation has taken place at Bridgwater and more is likely in the near future.

All of these monasteries were swept away in the Dissolution in the 1530s. The story has been told in detail by Joe Bettey (1989). This resulted in one of the greatest periods of changes in landlords ever seen; in many cases stewards and bailiffs and other monastic officials acquired the estates they had been running previously for their monastic overlords. Monasticism was dead in England for 250 years to be revived only in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century.

This final phase of monasticism in Somerset brings us up to the present day. Downside Abbey was established in 1794, the community having been formerly at Douai in northern France since 1607. It moved to its present site in 1814 taking over an existing mansion and extending it (Aston 1993b). This is now the head of the English Benedictine congregation, so after around 1500 years of monasticism, Somerset is still at the forefront with, like the earlier Glastonbury, one of the most important establishments in the country.