

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**The Monastic and Kindred Institutions of Bristol and
Gloucestershire**

by J. Mitchinton
1905, Vol. 28, 38-47

© The Society and the Author(s)

THE MONASTIC AND KINDRED INSTITUTIONS OF BRISTOL AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND JOHN MITCHINSON, D.C.L., Canon of
Gloucester, and Master of Pembroke College, Oxford,

President of the Society.

I HAD better begin with Amos' disclaimer, "I am no prophet, neither am I a prophet's son, but I am an herdman and a gatherer of wild figs." I have no business in this chair. I am in no sense an antiquary, and my knowledge of the small plot of archæology that I affect to work is of the shallowest. I have neither the leisure nor the habit of mind necessary for the historical investigation of the subject. My knowledge (such as it is) is all at second-hand, and architectural more than antiquarian.

After this much-needed apology, I announce my subject: "The monastic and kindred institutions that still exist above ground in Bristol and Gloucestershire." By kindred institutions I mean friaries and colleges: not hospitals, much less chantries. Even with this limitation, the subject is wider than I like to face.

I had at first thought of tracing Gloucestershire monasticism from its *origines*; but I soon found that I was wholly unequal to its adequate treatment, being away from books and unused to original historical research: and also that it has already been fully treated in your *Transactions* by a master's hand. So I take what interests me, and must try to interest you in it.

In order to take a conspectus of monastic Bristol and Gloucestershire, we must pass before us in brief review the different monastic orders. Two great Orders or "Rules"

dominate English monasticism, the rule of St. Benedict and that of St. Austin.

Both were simple, and though sufficiently strict to provide a real discipline of community life, were both "sweetly reasonable." And both had enough of elasticity to render them permanent amid the shifting conditions of national life, recuperative and reproductive. For out of these two were evolved other systems, which flourished with more or less of vitality side by side with the parent orders.

In the case of the Benedictines, the reason for secession first of Cluniacs then of Cistercians was dissatisfaction with a rule which to more ardent Pietists seemed not sufficiently strict. It was the same cult of perfection through asceticism which evolved the Montanists and Novatians in the second and third centuries, and long afterwards gave birth to Puritanism and its brood of Separatists.

But while Cluniacs and Cistercians had their own separate organisation, they remained in close relation and full amity with the mother stock. Indeed, so close was the link between Cluniacs and Benedictines, that the Priors of Daventry and Monk Bretton sat in the English General Benedictine Chapter. Lewes was their mother house in England, but there were not many houses of the Order; nor is it easy accurately to define their relation with the parent house at Clugny.

The Cistercians also went off in quest of a stricter rule: from them sprang the Trappists of modern times. This yearning for austerity impressed itself on their monasteries. The church was plain and barn-like; no triforium; no tower: Pontigny is a good example of this severity, as also is Abbey Dore in England. Another peculiarity in their buildings was that whereas the Benedictine refectory lay parallel to the nave of the church across the cloister court, the Cistercian refectory ran out at right angles to the alley of the cloister opposite the nave.

They differed from the Benedictines in being essentially agricultural, farming their own lands. With them, con-

sequently, the *Conversi*, or lay brethren, formed a distinct element, and the *domus conversorum* a distinct feature in their buildings. The Benedictines rented their lands, and had paid lay servants.

Stricter still, and combining the cœnobite and anchorite life, was the Carthusian Order, which took its origin in France. Its founder was Bruno, a native and canon of Cologne in 1080. To most of us it is most familiar from the Grande Chartreuse in Dauphiné, the Certosa at Pavia, and the Charterhouse (better known now as school than monastery) in London. In this Order the buildings were yet plainer and grimmer than the Cistercian. The monks seldom met except in choir: each tenanted his separate cell, through an aperture in which his daily rations were thrust from the cloister. This unique monastic arrangement may be seen in the ruins of Mount Grace Priory, near Northallerton in Yorkshire. The Order never became popular in England: besides the two houses already mentioned there were but few; none in Gloucestershire. Our nearest were Witham and Hinton Charterhouse, both in Somerset.

The Augustinians were not monks or nuns, but canons or canonesses regular, because, unlike the secular canons of the cathedral and collegiate churches, they were bound by a definite rule of life. They were, like monks, enclosed, but much in the world; often engaged in parochial ministrations. They held, in fact, a middle place between monks and seculars.

From them sprang the Premonstratensians, a stricter branch, the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre, the Bridgettines for professed women, and our own indigenous English Order, the Gilbertines, founded 1139 by Gilbert of Sempringham, in Lincolnshire (this was their mother house), and consisting of communities of men living under the rule of St. Austin, and women living under the Benedictine rule, living separate but in one conventual establishment. This Order was largely confined to the eastern side of England: one house, Poulton in Wilts, closely adjoins our county.

Most of the larger monasteries of all the Orders had dependencies, or, as they are commonly called, cells—a difficult term to define. They varied in size, number and importance: *e.g.*, Leominster, a large establishment with a stately church, was a cell of Reading; Caversham, with but one resident canon and a tiny village church, was a cell to Notley. These cells were sometimes elevated into independent houses. Generally speaking, the priorate of a cell was dative, not elective; sometimes both revenue and title were given to some senior or *emeritus* of the parent monastery, who seldom visited the cell he was supposed to govern. Often—in the case of Augustinian cells usually—the parish church was served from the cell, the manse, like the parsonage of to-day, not being always closely contiguous to the church.

Alien Priors were cells to foreign houses, chiefly (though by no means exclusively) Norman, and the direct outcome of the Conquest. They simply swarmed in the counties bordering on the Channel, and were dotted over the country generally, as Deerhurst was made a cell of St. Denys by the Conqueror. There were from 100 to 150 of them, chiefly Benedictine but by no means confined to that Order. These cells were dependencies or colonies of the great French abbeys to which they belonged, manned or at least officered by Frenchmen; but they were virtually nothing but foreign agencies to collect and remit rents and profits to the mother houses. Large sums were thus annually drained from the country. Dom. Gasquet makes the almost incredible assertion that in the reign of Edward III. £2,000 (=some £60,000) found its way annually to Cluniac houses alone. This meant that during the French wars England was largely subsidising her enemy, to say nothing of the fact that Alien Priors constituted a kind of Intelligence Department to the foe. One cannot wonder, therefore, that our kings from time to time intercepted and appropriated their revenues. From about 1200 to 1400 they led a chequered existence, and finally were suppressed in 1414 and their revenues vested in

the Crown. This was the first great act of Disendowment in England, and doubtless formed a precedent for the greater one which followed in the next century. In this case, however, there was no secularisation of church endowment. The foreign cells either were made denizen, or their property was diverted to the augmentation of English foundations, such as the Carthusian house at Shene, or the colleges of Eton, King's, Cambridge, and Windsor; or as Deerhurst was assigned to Tewkesbury.

From the Monks we pass to the Friars, a totally different organisation; bound indeed by the three great rules of chastity, poverty and obedience, but devoted not to self-culture in spiritual matters, but to the salvation of their fellow-men. Hence they were not, like monks, enclosed, being devoted to spiritual work outside their convent, which was more of a shelter than a home. Their houses were established almost entirely in towns and generally in their slums. They lived among the people, begged their daily bread, and in the days of their first zeal were both useful and popular. There were about 200 friaries in England apportioned mainly among four great Orders, Dominicans or Black Friars, Franciscans or Grey Friars, Carmelites or White Friars, and Augustinians or Eremites. There were a few lesser Orders, the most important of which were the Trinitarians or Maturines or Red Friars and the Crouched or Crossed Friars. Their houses were as a rule small, averaging ten inmates: their main business was preaching and teaching, and they lived on the alms of the people among whom they worked. Beyond their house, its church and ornaments they had no endowments. Hence at the Dissolution they contributed a beggarly quota to the spoil of the royal robber.

Any sketch, however slight, would be incomplete without some reference to the two military monastic Orders, the Templars and the Knights of St. John, or Hospitallers, familiar to us who still read our Scott from *The Talisman* and *Ivanhoe*. They were a strange hybrid between soldier

and monk, the former being the predominant feature. Into the tragic history of the Templars' fall I must not enter. Suffice it to say that their Order was suppressed in 1312, and the greater part of their possessions and preceptories was transferred to the Hospitallers as being a kindred Order with like aims, viz. the relief of the poor, the maintaining of hospitality, the celebration of divine service, and the defence of the Holy Land.

There is yet another cœnobitic institution, distinct from the monastery and yet having some affinity with conventual life, viz. the College of Secular Priests, similar in constitution to the Old Foundation Cathedral Chapters. Some of them survived into my recollection—Windsor, Wolverhampton, Manchester, Ripon (refounded as a college out of a monastery), Southwell, Middleham, Heytesbury, Wimborne, St. Endellion, with a more or less complete roll of canons or prebendaries, with the Portionist churches of Tiverton, Burford, Pontesbury. But the Act of 1840, through sheer wantonness of destruction, not only assigned the revenues of most of them to the Ecclesiastical Commission, but actually dissolved the corporations. Westminster (refounded as a college after the dissolution of St. Peter's Abbey), Windsor, and St. Endellion (saved probably by its obscurity and impecuniosity) are all that now survive. Eton and Winchester have been secularised and disendowed, and turned into governing bodies.

These colleges were numerous down to the reign of Edward VI., and were a most useful and beneficent institution; but with the hospitals, equally useful and beneficent, they were swept away to satisfy the unholy greed of the boy king's uncles and courtiers. In Durham "Bishopric" (not diocese) there were five—Darlington, Chester-le-Street, Staindrop, Auckland, Norton; and from these centres the prebendaries served the neighbouring village churches, living as seculars but under statutable discipline, very much like the modern clergy house.

It is not easy to draw the line of demarcation between

colleges and the larger chantries. These are not infrequently loosely styled colleges.

This completes our survey, and it now only remains briefly to state what samples we have of all of these in Gloucestershire.

Of Benedictine abbeys we have our great Abbey of St. Peter in Gloucester, refounded at the Dissolution as the Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity at the creation of the diocese out of Worcester, and the Abbeys of Tewkesbury and Winchcombe. All these were mitred at the time of the Dissolution, *i.e.* the abbot wore the insignia of episcopacy and sat as a Lord of Parliament with the Peers. Winchcombe is entirely gone, with the exception of some carefully-preserved fragments and a small oaken door.

St. Peter's, Gloucester, had several cells or dependencies. (1) St. Guthlac's, at Hereford: possibly St. Peter's Church in that city may have served as the chapel of the cell, but its site is more probably where the gaol stands. (2) Bromfield, in Salop: the church survives, and the ruins of a mansion on its south side, probably built on the site and out of the materials of the Priory. (3) Ewenny, in Glamorgan, has its stately Norman church almost intact, and its gatehouse and precinct wall (in part). (4) Stanley St. Leonard, in Gloucestershire, also has its interesting church complete, and another small Decorated building of uncertain identification.

To these we must add Kilpeck, in Herefordshire, with its beautiful little Norman parish church, which probably also served for the offices of the Religious; and Ewyas Harold, largely reconstructed, but possessing a massive and dignified west tower—if indeed these were cells in the proper sense of the word. Llantwit Major, too, in Glamorgan, also belonged to Gloucester, with a church of exceptional interest, gatehouse, dovecot and barn, all pointing to a monastic settlement. The advowson was in the patronage of the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester till quite recently, when they exchanged it with the Bishop of Llandaff for a non-bilingual benefice elsewhere.

Besides these, the great abbey had a dependency at Oxford for purely academic purposes, Gloucester Hall, and a cell, St. Peter's, at Norwich; and, as though all this was not enough, it unsuccessfully contested with Chertsey the claim to mother the Benedictine priory at Cardigan.

Tewkesbury had as its cells St. James at Bristol, Cranborne in Dorset, and Deerhurst. The nave of the great Church of St. James much mutilated is used as the church of the parish. Deerhurst was an old Saxon monastery. It seems certain that St. Elphege was an inmate, and also abbot. It passed in the fifteenth century under the rule of Tewkesbury. Its most interesting church with the adjoining manse, considerably altered, still exist.

Our Cistercian houses are Hayles, Flaxley and Kingswood. Of Hayles I need not speak. Till lately a considerable portion of the cloister was all that was known to exist. Thanks to the skilful operations of Canon Bazeley and Mr. Baddeley, we now know all about the great church and the chapter house; and we eagerly await more light as further excavations are undertaken.

Of Flaxley very little is left; what there is—a groined basement, now used as kitchen, and a good pointed door—are encased in a dwelling house, some of the roofs of which are possibly original.

Of Kingswood nothing is left but the beautiful abbey gatehouse. Kingswood had a cell at Tetbury: a small fragment of wall with two or three trefoiled lancet windows (blocked) and a pointed door is all that remains of it.

There were in Gloucestershire three Austin Canons' houses. Bristol, St. Augustine's Abbey, refounded as a Cathedral Chapter in 1542, and now restored to more than its original dimensions; part of its Perpendicular cloister its fine Norman chapter house, with vestibule, a Decorated refectory door, and two Norman gatehouses are in existence.

Of the great Abbey of Cirencester not a trace survives above ground but a gatehouse—not the principal one.

Lanthon, properly Lantonia Secunda, just outside

Gloucester, almost obliterated by rail and canal, still possesses a splendid fragment of a barn, big enough and solidly enough built for a church, a timbered hospitium (?), and a fragment of what must have been a noble gatehouse, was formerly a cell to the Lanthony Abbey hid away among the bleak hills of Monmouthshire near the Vale of Ewias. In the time of Edward IV. their relative positions became reversed: Lantonia Secunda became the mother house, and the abbey on the Honddu the cell. Lanthony had a small dependency at Brockworth, where there is an almost exact reproduction of the Gloucester hospitium (?), with interesting wall painting in an upper room.

Gloucestershire had its share of alien cells.

Beckford, cell to St. Barbe en Ange in Normandy, or according to some authorities to Cormeille; granted by Henry VI. to Eton College.

Brimpsfield, cell to Fontenay, then assigned to Eton College, and subsequently to Fotheringay College.

Deerhurst, cell to St. Denys, assigned finally to Tewkesbury.

Minchinhampton and Avening, dependencies of the Abbaye aux Dames (Ste Trinité) at Caen, both assigned to Syon (Bridgettine).

Hasildon, a small monastery where the Cistercian monks of Kingswood sojourned in the time of King Stephen.

Horsley, a cell of St. Martin of Troarn, which passed by exchange to the Priory of Bruton.

Of these little or nothing in the shape of conventual buildings survives. The parish church in whole or in part probably served for their divine offices.

And, lastly, for the colleges. There were but few. By far the most important was Westbury-on-Trym: a fine church and a gatehouse tower still attest its importance.

Cirencester, before it was made regular by Henry I., was a college of secular priests.

Frocester was a college which became merged in St. Peter's, Gloucester. And there is said to have been a college

at Kinline or Kinley, in the parish of Nimpsfield, of which I can find nothing.

The following Friars' houses existed. At Gloucester houses of Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites; considerable portions of the two former houses still remain. At Wootton-under-Edge a small establishment of Crutched Friars. At Bristol the Dominicans had a house in Merchant Street, the Franciscans in Lewin's Mead, the Carmelites on the site of Colston Hall, and the Augustinians in the Goods Yard of Temple Meads Station. The refectory and infirmary of the first-named house still exist, and traces of the Carmelites' house were recently found in digging foundations to the west of Colston Hall. It is evident from an entry in the Pleas of the Crown for 1287 (*Transactions*, xxii. 168-9) that the Brethren of the Sac, or as they were rightly called Brethren of the Penance of Jesus Christ, had a house in Bristol about that time; but nothing is known concerning it, and the Order was suppressed by the Council of Lyons in 1307.
