

The Lost Abbey of Eynsham

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Medieval Eynsham Abbey, a view from the fishponds, from a print by Peter Lorimer © Eynsham Parish Council.
Dog's head gargoyle formerly in the Vicarage Garden. Now at the MRC, OCMS.

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For

Posy, Kate and Anna

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Preface and Acknowledgements

On 4 December 1538, Eynsham Abbey was surrendered to the Crown. For over half a millennium the huge structure had dominated the village and the surrounding countryside, towering over the farms and cottages of Eynsham's inhabitants. Following the Dissolution in the 16th century, it was gradually demolished and pillaged for its building materials over the next 130 years or so. Now, nothing remains *in situ* above ground.¹ Attempts to discover the layout of the lost abbey buildings and what they may have looked like have been hampered by the fact that much of what may remain of the abbey church now lies beneath the graveyard of St Leonard's parish church. Until the late 20th century extension to the churchyard, most graves had been cut through construction and demolition layers and in at least one instance came across massive stone foundations.²

This study is, in part, a summary of the history of the Benedictine abbey from its foundation in about 1005 to its re-establishment in the 12th century; from its growth in the medieval period to its fall in the 16th century; from its disappearance to its rediscovery in more recent times. However, it is also an attempt to reconstruct what the abbey, or at least parts of it, may have looked like at various points in that history. This will necessarily require comparisons to be made with abbeys and cathedrals whose remains are more complete, and with other churches in Britain and Europe. It will also involve a degree of speculation, not to say guesswork. Although it might be argued that all conclusions should be based solely on the traces of the abbey that have so far emerged, it is worth repeating the old archaeological adage that 'absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.' It therefore seems reasonable at times to make particular assertions about Eynsham which apply to the generality of abbeys from the same period.

Numerous stones and artefacts from the abbey have been discovered and recorded over the last two hundred years. Most of the old houses, barns and walls in the central part of the village were built, at least partially, from material from Eynsham Abbey which was such a convenient quarry. Finely cut and chiselled ashlar blocks can be found in many places and even the rougher, uncut 'rubble' stone may have come from the infilling of an abbey wall or pier. In addition, there are many fragments of carved stones which formed arches, doors, windows and monuments of the abbey church and its associated monastic buildings. There are certainly many more in the village as when they were re-cycled by villagers in the past, the sculpted surface would more likely than not be placed on the inside of a wall, leaving the flat surface on the outside.

Larger abbey stones, as one might expect, were generally used in the foundation or bottom layers of walls and only in exceptional circumstances are ever likely to be recoverable. Smaller pieces, such as column fragments and mouldings, were used in the upper levels.

¹ It has been tentatively suggested by R.A. Chambers in *Eynsham Abbey Excavations*, *ER* 7, 1990, that part of the north gate to the abbey precinct may have been assimilated in the west end of St Leonard's parish church although this is 'not yet proven'. However, see the author's article on Thomas Hearne's Eynsham, *ER* 33, 2016 and Chapter 14.

² Gray M. and Clayton N., *Excavations on the site of Eynsham Abbey 1971*, *Oxoniensia*, Vol. XLIII, 1978.

Such was the case with worked stones recently recorded from collapsed walls in Conduit Lane, Lombard Street, Newland street, Abbey Farm and Holewelle field. The display of moulded stones in walls and gateposts is very much a 20th/21st century fashion and some of the above have been re-set and are now visible for the first time since the abbey's destruction.

The picture we have of the Eynsham Abbey is clearer than it was even 50 years ago thanks to the efforts of local historians and archaeologists, particularly the excavations of part of the abbey site between 1989 and 1992. It is still incomplete but enough has been uncovered to enable some tentative conclusions to be drawn. New discoveries are being made year on year and the evidence will need to be re-assessed in the future. It is known too that there are other collections of stones which have yet to be fully recorded and which may change our perceptions. Of course, there is a danger of assuming that all the ancient stones found in the village and its vicinity came from Eynsham Abbey. They may have come from other buildings or indeed from elsewhere, in the same way that some abbey stones have turned up in villages around or even further afield. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, it is important to make a start, to record what has been done and hopefully to provoke further research to rescue this lost abbey from oblivion.

This study would not have been possible but for the publications of others, many of them living in Eynsham, whose contributions I hope I have fully acknowledged. In addition, I am grateful to all the local residents, over 100, whose willingness to allow me to record stones and artefacts, and to use some of them for this book, has been indispensable. To respect their right to privacy, I have for the most part not included specific names and addresses but future researchers can contact the author for available details. However, an honourable mention should be made here of David Rivalin who has unearthed many stones in Holewelle Field and alerted me to others in the village. Likewise, Dr Bryan Hyde who entrusted me with his collection of abbey stones and Sonny Schneider who drained the race at Hardwick Mill to enable me to photograph an abbot's tombstone (Figure 259). I am grateful too to Peter Glare for his help with some of the medieval Latin of the *Eynsham Cartulary*.

David Moon at the Museum Resources Centre (MRC) at Standlake gave unprecedented access to the Eynsham material there, rescuing from deep storage some of the larger items and providing photographic facilities. Andy Libby, Ian Looker and the contractors E.S.S. were especially helpful in rescuing abbey stones from the collapsed Co-op wall in 2014.³ Similarly, Gary Smith from Savvy construction who enabled me to photograph stones from the demolished stables of Beech Court House in Newland Street.

Thanks are also due to the following who have granted permission to use copyright material: Arts Council of England for Figure 129; Bodleian Library, University of Oxford for Figures 26, 27, 32, 37, 49, 51, 71, 98, 262, 264, 266, 268, 270; British Library Board for Figures 244 and 284; Sue Chapman for Figure 141; Corpus Christi College, Oxford for Figure 247; Paul Davies for Figure 12; English Heritage Archive for Figure 269; Eynsham History Group for

³ Parrinder S., *The Co-op Wall*, ER 31, 2014.

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The archaeologist Alan Hardy who was the principal supervisor of the excavation of 1989-92, read the first draft of the main text of this book, gave professional advice and provided an important corrective to some of my assumptions. His support, encouragement and friendship have been invaluable.

Special gratitude is due to the late Brian Atkins who, as editor of the *Eynsham Record* for 30 years, and President of the Eynsham History Group from 2002 to 2013, did so much to rescue the village's history and give the local community a sense of its roots. Shortly before he died, Brian charged me with the safekeeping of his significant collection of Eynsham Abbey stones but it would be more appropriate if they, and others found around the village or stored at the Museum Resources Centre at Standlake, could be displayed in a purpose-built museum. Any profits from this publication will be put towards a fund to realise this ideal.

Whereas I am indebted to all the above for their assistance, errors of fact or interpretation are entirely my responsibility. In particular, it will be apparent to specialist architectural historians that I lack expertise in some areas and I beg their forbearance. A glossary of some of the architectural terms used is provided in Appendix 4.

Lastly, historians are oft reminded that all history is contemporary history, that we view the past with the spectacles of the present and in the light of our current attitudes and prejudices. In this I am no exception, and however much one might acknowledge that the past is a different country, particularly as regards the belief systems of the medieval era, it is difficult to disguise the more secular and sceptical approaches of the early 21st century.

⁴ See Appendix 3

Chapter 1

Beginnings

*The intelligible forms of ancient poets,
The fair humanities of old religion,
The power, the beauty and the majesty
That had their haunts in dale or piny mountain
Or forest, by slow stream or pebbly spring
Or chasms and watery depths: all these have vanish'd¹*

Long before the establishment of an abbey, Eynsham may have been an area of special significance. Its position, on a gravel terrace adjoining a fording point on the upper Thames, near the crossing of north-south and east-west land routes and containing many natural springs and exploitable resources, made it an attractive place for settlement from the earliest times. West Oxfordshire is rich in prehistoric remains and archaeological investigations on the Eynsham Abbey site in 1989-92 revealed the existence of a ditched enclosure dating to the Bronze Age or possibly even earlier.² Within the ditch was found a large, very weathered



Figure 1. The reconstructed henge monument at Stanton Harcourt (Oxon), known as 'The Devil's Quoits'.

¹ Extract from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Piccolomini*. All chapters start with the conceit of a quotation. Some are clearly appropriate; others may seem a contrivance.

² Hardy A. and Dodd A. and Keevill G.D. et al., *Aelfric's Abbey - Excavations at Eynsham Abbey, Oxfordshire, 1989-92*, English Heritage. Published by Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2003. Eynsham hit the national headlines in the very dry summer of 2018 when extensive crop marks from the same period were revealed in a field north of Foxley's Farm.

Figure 2. Eynsham's 'Bronze Age' standing stone, re-erected in the Tolkein Memorial garden of St Peter's Roman Catholic church, Eynsham.



fragment of limestone, like those which make up the circular monument at nearby Great Rollright and the so-called 'Devil's Quoits' at Stanton Harcourt, one of the most important ritual complexes in Britain, which has been recently reconstructed (Figure 1).

The Eynsham stone has been re-erected in the Tolkein Memorial garden of St Peter's Roman Catholic Church (Figure 2). It is not unusual for ancient sites with religious connotations to be reused as such by later generations, thereby appropriating their spiritual ethos.

However, although an attractive proposition, it is important to be aware that there is as yet no archaeological evidence to suggest any religious or ritualistic significance of the Bronze Age enclosure, nor for the idea that it was associated with the 'standing stone'. Indeed, a report of 2001 concluded that it was most probable that the stone was brought to the site from elsewhere during the medieval period as foundation material for one of the abbey buildings.³ Why the monks would have taken so much trouble when there was an abundant supply of stone locally is open to question but at present, the hypothesis that there was some sort of 'sacred' continuity to the site, is very much unproven.

The earliest documentary evidence for Eynsham occurs in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 26 years before Saint Augustine came to England to start the conversion of southern Britain to Christianity. The entry for AD 571 reads: *In this year Cutha fought against the Britons at Biedcanford and captured four villages, Limbury, Aylesbury, Benson and Eynsham.*⁴ Cutha (or Cuthwulf) was a King of the West Saxons and the *Chronicle* was recounting the triumph of these peoples over the natives of Britain. However, these early parts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were actually written some 300 years later, during the reign of King Alfred the Great, and clearly have to be treated with caution. Although it might have been based on a strong oral tradition, the precise dating of events is misleading.

³ Barclay A. and Boyle A. and Keevill G.D., A Prehistoric Enclosure at Eynsham Abbey, Oxfordshire, *Oxoniensia*, Vol. LXVI: pp. 105-162, 2001.

⁴ Garmonsway G.N. (Trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, Everyman's Library 1967.

The most that can be said is that Eynsham's reputation as an important centre probably had ancient roots. It is supportive of the idea that it may have had a major ecclesiastical establishment, a Minster of a large district or *parochia* with its own community of loosely organised priests, even before the foundation of the Benedictine abbey. The Minster, originally a centre for missionary work, would have had a number of dependant churches in its locality which owed symbolic tribute to the mother church. The siting of a Minster in an area of previous settlement was not atypical as the positioning of the Minsters at Abingdon and Bampton demonstrate. Archaeological finds at the Eynsham Abbey site included an unusually large assemblage of early and middle Saxon pottery, and the animal and fish bone evidence are suggestive of a privileged diet and high-ranking occupation by the early eighth century. The late 20th century excavations also turned up some rare eighth century coins infrequently found on standard domestic sites. Directly below the early 11th century abbey, evidence emerged of high-status timber structures with wall plaster which would also be consistent with Eynsham's role within the Minster system.⁵

Other documents provide further evidence of the idea that Eynsham was a distinguished place and 'originally more important than Oxford.'⁶ About the year AD 821, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Wulfred, surrendered a huge estate of 300 hides at Eynsham to King Coenwulf of Mercia.⁷ A hide was a variable measurement of land in the early medieval period but 300 hides might approximate in Oxfordshire to a vast 30,000 acres or more. The suggestion therefore, is that Eynsham was a prestigious and very wealthy religious centre which had been liberally endowed in the era of monastic revival in the late 7th or early 8th century. It has been postulated that the endowment was made by a 'sub-king' based at Eynsham itself and that there was some 'common element' in the foundation of the communities of Eynsham and St Frideswide in Oxford.⁸ It is thought that Eynsham's estate probably included Cassington, Yarnton, Cogges, Stanton Harcourt and Water Eaton. Interestingly, other Minsters (e.g. Chertsey, Gloucester and Pershore) were also endowed with 300 hides indicating that this was the normal practice for the financing of religious houses. The argument for such an early religious foundation at Eynsham is also supported by the fact that it fills a gap between other Minster controlled districts in the region, for example Bampton upstream and St Frideswide's, Oxford, downstream.

This large estate at Eynsham appears to have been progressively eroded by secular rulers thereafter and one example of this occurred in AD 864 when Burgred, King of Mercia granted five hides at Water Eaton to Alwin, Bishop of Worcester with the proviso that the bishop paid the large sum of 30 *shillings to Eynsham to that church from the tribute*. Clearly a church at Eynsham existed by this date and the implication is that Water Eaton had belonged to Eynsham which was now being dispossessed of it. Such expropriations of church land were not uncommon in the late 9th century and by the early 11th century Eynsham's extensive holdings seem to have been largely lost. The process of alienation of church land, as well as

⁵ Blair J., *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire*, Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994. A modern reconstruction of a section of the wall is displayed in Woodstock Museum alongside other Anglo-Saxon artefacts from Eynsham.

⁶ Blair J., *Saint Frideswide Reconsidered, Oxoniensia*, Vol. LII: pp. 71-127, 1987.

⁷ Campbell J. and John E. and Wormald P., *The Anglo-Saxons*, p. 174. Phaidon Press Ltd, 1982. Published by the Folio Society, 2018.

⁸ Blair, *Saint Frideswide Reconsidered*, op. cit.

increasing Viking raids, probably contributed to the decline of religious houses and regular observance of monastic customs.⁹

However, from the mid-10th century, under the influence of Archbishops Dunstan and Oswald and Bishop, later Saint, Aethelwold, there had been another religious revival in England. New monasteries were established and existing ones reinvigorated and regularized as Benedictine houses, following the *Rule* of St Benedict written in the early 6th century. Eynsham's establishment, or re-establishment in AD 1005 was a late example of this reforming process and the only one in Oxfordshire.¹⁰ The context for its foundation charter was the devastating attacks by the Danes and widespread famine, *the most severe in living memory* according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. For some, these events were evidence of a wrathful deity and seemed to presage the ending of the world, an idea given extra credence by the recent onset of the millennium. The perceived Viking threat had resulted in the massacre of Danes living in Oxford in 1002, in the course of which St Frideswide's church, its ornaments and library were burnt to the ground. A few years later, in 1009, marauding Norsemen exacted their revenge on the whole town.

Eynsham's foundation charter, 'one of the most imposing...of its age'¹¹, was issued by King Aethelred II, so called Ethelred the Unready. He stated that because of the *perilous times* occasioned by *the most savage assault of the rampaging barbarous enemies...afflicting us almost to the point of extinction*, he had *determined to appease God with a never-ending display of good works*...¹² The original charter does not survive but a copy was made in the late 12th century and appears as the first item in the *Eynsham Cartulary*. Although forgeries of such charters are certainly not unknown, the authenticity of Eynsham's document has not been disputed. Nevertheless, its appearance in the 1190s was fortuitous to say the least, as will be seen in Chapter Five. In the charter, the monastery at Eynsham was granted special privileges at the behest of one of Aethelred's leading noblemen, Aethelmaer the Stout, and was *now duly dedicated, in honour of St Saviour and all his Saints, and established at an important place, hard by the river Thames, called Eynsham*... St Mary and St Benedict were added to the dedication although eventually the abbey was referred to simply as St Mary's Eynsham. Aethelmaer declared that his intention was to retire to Eynsham himself and live in the monastic community. His precise motives are unclear but it has been suggested that it was prompted by his falling out of favour at Court and that this move may not have been entirely voluntary.¹³

The reference to Eynsham as under the protection of the king and as *an important place* is a further indication of Eynsham's contemporary significance, particularly as the word 'place' often carried the connotation of 'holy place' at the time. The fact that Aethelmaer *therein is establishing monks who will order their lives by the Rule* and that *he has appointed the abbot* also suggests that this was more a reordering of a pre-existing house rather than a brand-new foundation. This seems confirmed by the statement that 'Aethelmaer had received

⁹ An Eynsham stone, purporting to show Viking Runes was photographed by William Bainbridge in 1976. Whereabouts unknown.

¹⁰ Blair, *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire*, op. cit.

¹¹ Keynes S., King Aethelred's charter for Eynsham Abbey (1005) in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*. N. Brooks (ed.), Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2008.

¹² Gordon E., *Eynsham Abbey 1005-1228. A Small Window into a Large Room*, p. 10. Phillimore and Co. Ltd., 1990.

¹³ Jones C.A., *Aelfric's Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*, p.12. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

the monastery from his son-in-law Aethelweard through an exchange, a transaction which might have occurred some years before.¹⁴ On the other hand, as Salter pointed out, the term *monasterium* was often used of a church in the eleventh century so it is far from conclusive.¹⁵ The foundation charter concludes with an extensive list of 86 prominent contemporaries including the royal family, both archbishops, the majority of bishops, 16 abbots, three ealdormen and 44 thegns.

The new abbot, *he who is there now*,¹⁶ was to be Aelfric ‘the Grammarian’, one of the leading intellectuals and teachers of his day. Aelfric was born c. 955 and had a significant intellectual and spiritual pedigree having received his training at Winchester and serving under Bishop Aethelwold. He had been transferred c. 987 to Cerne Abbas (Cernel) in Dorset and had already collaborated with Aethelmaer in reforming the monastery there. It was at Cerne that most of Aelfric’s literary activity took place and his extensive works include sermons, homilies, *Lives of Saints* and a *Grammar*, the earliest such work in medieval Europe.¹⁷ He is best known for the *Colloquy* which aimed to teach correct Latin to young monks by means of a largely, but not totally rehearsed dialogue with them. However, it is also a subtle and detailed commentary on the lives of ordinary people in the society of his day, those who tend to be overlooked in most Anglo-Saxon literature. He has been described as ‘the father, the inventor, of the rich tradition of plainly stated, undecorated, but vigorous and powerful English prose.’¹⁸ The novices he instructed would have been taught in the cloister and kept apart from the regular monks.

It would seem that Aelfric arrived at Eynsham sometime between 1002 and 1005 and that the latter date, and the foundation charter, represents the end of the process for establishing the Benedictine House that may have begun some time before.¹⁹ Aelfric’s standing as the ‘greatest prose writer of the Anglo-Saxon period’²⁰ was already high and his appointment to the abbacy of Eynsham was another sign of its existing reputation. Aelfric wrote a *Customary*, better known as his *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*, setting out the practical implications of the Benedictine Rule because he felt that they needed to know what ‘customs’ they were committed to. He implies that what he calls *your brotherhood* had *until now* been ignorant of monastic practices which he was familiar with. This may not have been because they were novices but because they had, before 1005, adopted a less strict approach to the religious life.²¹ The *Letter* uses as its main source the *Regularis Concordia* compiled by St Aethelwold and his fellow reformers at Winchester in the early 970s. It tailors the *Concordia* to the conditions that prevailed at the more modest Oxfordshire House and is a rare record of the daily detailed offices or liturgy that the monks of Eynsham were expected to perform.

¹⁴ Keynes, *op. cit.*, p. 455.

¹⁵ Salter H.E., *Medieval Oxford*, Clarendon Press for the Oxford Historical Society, 1936.

¹⁶ Salter H.E., *Eynsham Cartulary*, Vol. 1: p. 27, Oxford Historical Society, Clarendon Press, 1907.

¹⁷ Garmonsway G.N. (ed.), *Aelfric’s Colloquy*, Methuen’s Old English Library, 1965.

¹⁸ Campbell et al., *op.cit.*, p. 284.

¹⁹ Jones, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Greenfield S.B. and Calder D.G. and Lapidge M., *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, New York, 1986. Quoted in Jones, *op.cit.*

²¹ Gordon, *Eynsham Abbey*, *op.cit.*

Aelfric's patron, Aethelmaer, endowed the abbey with the manor of Eynsham, with an initial grant of 30 hides, as well as the church of St Ebbe's in Oxford, his urban manor with its two mills and several properties in Oxford, to provide the monks with rental income.²² In addition, the abbey received many properties both in the county (Shifford, Yarnton, Shipton-on-Cherwell) and further afield in Gloucestershire (Mickelton), Warwickshire (Marlcliff), Worcestershire (Bentley), Surrey (Esher and Ditton) and Sussex (Rye) making a total of nearly 120 hides. Another estate at 'Burton' has not been identified.

Eynsham's wealth and status as a 'locus celebris' or famous place, seems confirmed by Bishop White Kennett writing in 1695. Quoting the antiquary Henry Spelman, Kennett claimed that in 1009 a Council was held at Eynsham 'by the advice of the Archbishops of York and Canterbury (and) many decrees were enacted.' However, it is probably right to treat this statement circumspectly as Kennett had a reputation for being 'a bold guesser.'²³ Nevertheless, the claim was reiterated in a chronology in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1820 which stated that a Wittenagemot was held at Eynsham by Ethelred the Unready in 1009.²⁴ The Wittenagemot or witan was an assembly of the most important magnates, both spiritual and temporal, in Anglo-Saxon England, an advisory body to the king. Further, an analysis of food remains found in the excavation of 1989-92 confirmed that the abbey was very comfortably off at this time by comparison with other late Saxon sites which might support the idea that it was an important venue for leading dignitaries of the kingdom.

Aelfric probably died around AD 1010 which is when his literary output ceased and he was almost certainly buried within his abbey near the high altar. Aethelmaer vanishes from the records after 1014 although his role in the founding of Eynsham's abbey was still remembered by monks there over 100 years later.²⁵ The memory of Aelfric lasted much longer and a window in the chancel of St Leonard's church reminds parishioners even today of Eynsham's long spiritual heritage (Figure 3). A blue plaque to commemorate Eynsham's first abbot may also be shortly installed on the market hall.

The history of the abbey from 1010 to 1109 is not entirely clear and subject to some disputation. It would seem that during the reign of King Cnut (1016-35), Eynsham was dispossessed of several of its properties and went into decline. These included Marlcliff, Bentley, Esher and Ditton, Shipton-on-Cherwell, the unidentified Burton, and Rye with its harbour and salt pans.²⁶ However, it survived, as evidenced by the fact that around 1051 *the abbot and all the community of Eynsham* were witnesses to an agreement made at the shire moot concerning the lease of Great Tew by St Albans Abbey.²⁷

²² Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, op. cit. implies that one of these mills was later known as Blackfriars Mill, mentioned in an Eynsham charter of 1091 which referred to it as having been built some time ago.

²³ Salter, *Cartulary* op.cit., p. xiii. Kennett also claimed that Heamund Bishop of Sherborne, who was killed at the battle of Meretun in 871, was buried at Eynsham *a famous place fit for the sepulture of Bishops soon after honoured with a cell of religion*. Kennett's *Parochial Antiquities*, 1818.

²⁴ Gomme G.L. (ed.), *The Gentleman's Magazine Library 1731-1868*, Elliot Stock 1897.

²⁵ Keynes, op.cit., p. 473.

²⁶ A 'quatrefoil' silver penny from the reign of Cnut has been found on the site of Eynsham Abbey and donated by Mr Roland Oakeley to the Eynsham History Group. Atkins B., *Buried Treasure, ER 2*, 1985.

²⁷ Gordon, op. cit.

Figure 3. Stained glass window depicting Aelfric in the south wall of the chancel of St Leonard's parish church, Eynsham. In memory of William Nash Bricknell, vicar, who died in 1928.

In the autumn of 1066, William 'The Bastard' invaded England. One chronicler subsequently claimed that *Eynsham Abbey had been laid waste at the Conquest and its brethren had fled away, frightened of the enemy*. The source for this apocalyptic assessment of the impact of the Conquest is the *Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, written by Adam, one-time prior and later Abbot of Eynsham Abbey in the early 13th century, some 14 decades after the event. Although he may have had access to documents now lost, there are other reasons for doubting the authority of Adam's account, as will be discussed later. Additionally, when he wrote his *Life* Adam was almost certainly living in Lincoln where the folk memory of the Conqueror's 'Harrowing of the North' was still strong. Not unreasonably perhaps, he may have assumed that William's reign of terror there was but a continuation of what had happened in the home counties. In actual fact, the Conqueror's army had crossed the Thames further south, at Wallingford, before closing in on London. Oxford, just 14 miles north of Wallingford was left untouched and it would be surprising if nearby Eynsham was less fortunate.



A more reliable source is the Conqueror's 'Domesday' Survey of 1086 which stated that *The Bishop of Lincoln holds Eynsham himself and the monk Columban from him...Land for 18*

ploughs; he found as many...The value is and was £20.²⁸ In other words, Eynsham was worth the same amount in 1086 as had been the case in the reign of Edward the Confessor which doesn't seem supportive of the idea that it had suffered total deprecation at the hands of the Normans. 'Domesday' does state that seven of the abbey's 13 properties in Oxford were derelict but this was the case with many of the houses in the town which seems to have been in decay. 'Domesday' has Eynsham itself with only 15½ hides (not the 30 which Aethelmaer had given) and it retained Shifford, Yarnton, Mickelton, the Oxford property and five hides in Little Rollright. Eynsham's annual income in 1086 has been calculated at a mere £40-9s-0d, about a tenth of that of Abingdon and one of the lowest in the country.²⁹

But, although Eynsham's wealth had shrunk, its endowment was 'still perfectly viable.'³⁰ The archaeological investigation of part of the abbey site, 1989-92, found no evidence that the Saxon abbey had been *laid waste* and its inmates dispersed. Indeed, the remains of a large kitchen and annexe dating to the end of the 11th century were found, indicating the survival of a significant community. Once again, the evidence of the diet of the inmates, particularly the high levels of fish consumption, supports the idea of continued occupation by some fairly well-off monks at this time and certainly no great poverty.

It is possible that the later chronicler was confusing the events of 1066 with what is said to have happened in 1070 when, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recorded, *the king had all the monasteries in England plundered*. Certainly, the predatory approach of the Norman invaders is well documented by contemporaries like William of Poitiers and the spoils of conquest were distributed far and wide. From the nearby abbey at Abingdon for example, the chronicler detailed the seizure of *a wealth of gold and silver vestments, books and vessels of different kinds intended for the rites and honour of the church*. Even newly imported Norman monks participated in the process and confiscated gold and silver treasures given to Abingdon by St Athelwold and sent them across the channel to their mother house of Jumièges. Like many imperialists, the Normans implicitly justified their colonialism by contemptuously characterising the natives as barbaric, uncouth, effete and decadent. They therefore had no compunction about destroying the Anglo-Saxon religious and artistic heritage in the quest to enrich themselves.³¹

The Conqueror's first appointment to an English bishopric was Remigius of Fécamp who, in 1067 was given the see of Dorchester which stretched from the river Humber in the north to the Thames in the south (see Figure 4).

It is claimed by some that Remigius should be credited with the re-foundation of the abbey after the Conquest but the evidence does not seem supportive of this as discussed above. In 1072, Remigius, perhaps mindful of the threat posed to his northern properties by the ambitions of the Archbishopric of York, decided to move his bishop's seat from Dorchester to Lincoln and began to construct a new cathedral there. Then, towards the end of his life in 1091, Remigius, aware of his mortality and the imminence of divine judgement for his sins,

²⁸ Morris J., *Domesday Book, Oxfordshire*, p. 6. Phillimore, 1978.

²⁹ Gordon E., *Eynsham Charters, ER 4*, 1987.

³⁰ Hardy et al., *op. cit.* p. 10.

³¹ Dodwell C.R., *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective*, Manchester University Press, 1982.

Figure 4. Map of the 11th century diocese of Dorchester/Lincoln. Design by Paul Hughes.



notably simony, developed plans to join Eynsham with the Minster at Stow in Lincolnshire creating a new Benedictine monastery. The latter, dedicated like Eynsham to St Mary, was to be directly under the bishop's patronage and Columban, presumably the same man referred to in Eynsham in 1086, was to be the new abbot of the merged institutions. Stow's foundation charter refers to the bequest of Eynsham as an *outstanding benefaction*³² which would hardly have been the case if it was derelict or a dormant institution. However, some doubts have been expressed as to the charter's authenticity, suggesting that it might have been forged at Eynsham which would somewhat undermine the validity of the statement.³³

In the event, the proposed union didn't survive as after Remigius died in 1092, his successor Robert Bloet, concerned that his predecessor had been overly generous in his grants of land to Stow, reversed the decision to merge the two institutions. The monks of Stow were therefore transferred to Eynsham and Abbot Columban. Bishop Blouet, at the insistence of the king, granted Eynsham additional properties in the south of the diocese to

³² Gordon, *Eynsham Abbey*, op. cit.

³³ Carpenter D.X., *The Charters of William II and Henry I - Eynsham Abbey*, <https://actswilliam2henry1.wordpress.com>, 2016.

recompense them for the loss of Stow and the bequests that had been made to the Minster there previously. Amongst the gifts that Stow had received were lands in the north of England (Newark, Fledborough, Brampton and Marton), supposedly given to the Minster before the Conquest by Earl Leofric and his wife, the legendary Lady Godiva. The bishop's compensation included the valuable manors and churches of Charlbury, South Stoke and Woodcote in Oxfordshire and Histon in Cambridgeshire.³⁴ Small wonder therefore that the monks of Eynsham included Leofric and Godiva in their prayers for founders and benefactors thereafter.

Bishop Bloet, who was also chancellor of England, seems to have been closely associated with Eynsham which he also valued as an attractive and convenient base closer to the centre of royal power. Bloet died of a stroke in 1123, falling from his horse whilst out hunting with King Henry I at Woodstock. Although his body was taken back to Lincoln, his entrails were buried in Eynsham Abbey, probably at the east end of the new abbey church which would have been the first part of the Norman structure to be completed. Bequeathing the abbey your bowels and intestines may not seem like much of a compliment but it was believed they were symbolic of your inner soul.³⁵

³⁴ Curthoys J., *Christ Church, Eynsham Abbey and its Cartulary*, ER 30, 2013.

³⁵ Some sources, for example the 14th century chronicler Henry Knyghton, have claimed that the bowels of Remigius were also buried at Eynsham. See Dugdale W., *Monasticon Anglicanum*, Vol. 3: Note I on page 1.