

1. The Arrival of the Monks

Monks probably first came to the St Thomas area shortly after the year 1100, at a time when there were people still living who could remember the battle of Hastings and the invasion of England by William the Conqueror. St Thomas was then a very different place from the bustling suburb of today. There were scarcely any houses to be seen. Much of the area was overgrown with scrub and woodland, but the low-lying parts near the river Exe were marshy and frequently waterlogged.

Men and women had known the area for a long time: tracks which had been used since the days of the Romans, and probably long before, led from the riverbank into the surrounding countryside, and on towards South Devon and Cornwall. At the place where these tracks converged there was a ford across the river, and also a fragile timber bridge, by which could be reached the ancient city of Exeter on the further bank.

But on the western side of the river there were no streets lined with buildings; only the occasional farmstead where a Saxon settler and his family had set to work, cutting down trees or clearing scrub, in order to provide themselves with land for grazing animals or growing crops. Even the name "St Thomas" was not in use. The place was known as Coic, or Cowick; and the name meant simply "cow farm".

However, even in this rural community of less than a hundred people, the consequences of the invasion of England by the Normans had been felt. At the time of the conquest the manor of Cowick had belonged to a man named Ailmar. Now Ailmar had been dispossessed, and his manor, together with many others throughout Devon, had been handed over to an interloper, a Norman of noble birth, whose name was Baldwin de Brionne. It was Baldwin and his family who were soon to bring the first of the monks to Cowick.

Baldwin, who became sheriff of Devon and custodian of Exeter castle under William the Conqueror, had fought with William at the battle of Hastings. His father was Gilbert, earl of Brionne in Normandy, who in the early 11th century had sponsored the foundation of a Benedictine abbey at Bec-Hellouin, some two miles from Brionne. Baldwin inherited from Gilbert a number of estates in France, and on his death in 1090 these passed to his son William, together with Baldwin's English properties, including the manor of Cowick just outside Exeter.⁽¹⁾

William the son of Baldwin was only one of many Norman lords who owned property on both sides of the English channel; and shortly after his father's death he decided to follow the example of many of his contemporaries who had used part of their estates in England to endow a religious house in their French homeland. William was naturally well-disposed to the abbey of Bec because of its close association with his family, and sometime between 1090 and 1107 he made a gift to the abbey of the manor of Cowick. He also gave to Bec the neighbouring manor of Exwick, which adjoined Cowick to the north.⁽¹⁾

We do not know if there were any conditions attached to these gifts; we know only that by the middle of the 12th century the abbot of Bec, whether on his own initiative or at William's request, had established a small priory at Cowick. The exact date of foundation is unknown, but the priory was certainly in existence by 1137.⁽²⁾ It was to be subordinate to Bec in spiritual matters, but financially it was to be independent; with this end in view, the monks of the priory were given the lordship and revenues of the two manors of Cowick and Exwick.

The arrival of the monks in Cowick must have given rise to as much excitement and speculation as the sudden ejection of Ailmar two or three generations previously. The inhabitants of Cowick not

only had new neighbours, but also had to come to terms once again with a new feudal overlord. Their apprehensions will have been heightened by the fact that the priory had been founded by a monastic house across the sea. In the early years some of the monks were men who had been born or settled in England, but all were members of the Benedictine order at Bec, and owed allegiance to the mother house in Normandy. After the mid 13th century there were no English monks at Cowick for over two hundred years, and until the 1400s the prior and all the monks resident there were French, sent out from Bec for a spell of duty in one of its English dependencies.



An 18th-century view of the abbey of Bec

[from *Some account of the alien priories...* collected from the MSS of John Warburton, Esq. and Dr. Ducarel (London, 1786)]

The names of some of the priors of Cowick – Eustace de Pont l'Évêque (1316-c.1327), John de Pierrefitte (c.1370-c.1374), Robert de Rouen (1447-1451) – reveal the French towns and villages from which they or their families came. Rouen, one of the major cities of northern France, is about twenty miles from Bec, while the village of Pierrefitte-en-Auge and the market town of Pont l'Évêque lie near the coast some thirty miles to the west. John de Bourgeauville, prior from 1398 to 1419, and Peter de Menneval, who held office for a few months in 1420, also took their names from villages in Normandy. In 1451 the connection with Bec was broken, and monks from France were seen at Cowick no more; but there can be no doubt that for much of its existence the priory formed an alien presence in the local community.

Cowick priory never achieved great wealth or importance. The largest monasteries in England, such as Canterbury and St Albans, supported as many as a hundred monks, and even among the English

dependencies of Bec there were two priories which maintained a convent of about eighteen; Cowick probably never housed more than six or seven monks at any one time.

But until the 15th century it always maintained, however precariously, its status as a conventual monastery where the offices were said daily, and monastic discipline was enforced under the rule of St Benedict and the statutes and customs of the house of Bec. For more than three hundred years the white habit, worn by all monks who owed allegiance to the abbey of Bec, must have been a familiar sight in the locality of Cowick.

(1) M. Morgan, *English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (Oxford, 1946), pp.9-11; *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 64 (1932), pp.398-400.

(2) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/6, from time of Bishop W. Warelwast, 1107-37; *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, ed. Chambers and others (London, 1933), p.50.