

10. The Last Days of Cowick Priory

As the reign of Henry VIII progressed, it became increasingly obvious that the days of the monasteries were numbered. In 1534 the monks were compelled to repudiate their allegiance to the pope, and to take an oath accepting the king as supreme head of the English church. In the following year the king ordered a survey of monastic and other ecclesiastical revenues; this was followed by a visitation of monastic houses by the king's agents; and in 1536 more than two hundred small monasteries with annual incomes below £200 were abolished.

Cowick priory was able to escape suppression in 1536 because it was part of the large abbey of Tavistock; but the likely direction of future events was already clear. Throughout England, in the monasteries which remained, discontented monks were encouraged by the king's agents to seek dispensation from their vows, or even to act as informers against those of their colleagues who opposed the royal policy.

The abbot's tenants in Cowick knew that troublous times lay ahead, and some of them set about securing their tenancies for as long a period as they could. In 1534 or 1535 Sir Thomas Denys obtained a new lease of his land at Barley Parks for a term of forty years. Two years later the abbot leased some fields in Cowick to Laurence Marlyon, a yeoman of Colyton, for fiftyfour years; and in November 1538 Edward Brydeman and his wife secured the reversion of the Bear inn in Exeter, two fields adjoining St Thomas churchyard, and two further pieces of field and meadow called Okemed and Strayer Park, for a term of no less than sixty years.⁽⁸²⁾

In the early months of 1539 the king's commissioners began their tour of the remaining monasteries in Devon. Their purpose was to obtain a deed of "voluntary" surrender from each of the monasteries in turn. Nowhere was any resistance offered. Dunkeswell abbey was the first to be dissolved, on 14 February. Within two or three weeks another ten Devonshire monasteries had capitulated.

Prior John Coter and the monks of Cowick travelled to Tavistock, and there on 3 March 1539 they joined with Abbot John Peryn and the other monks of the house in putting their signatures to the deed of surrender.⁽⁸³⁾ On that day monastic life at Cowick finally came to an end.

Divine service, which (apart from a short break in the 1450s) had been maintained at the priory for over four hundred years, was said there no more. The monks departed into secular life, each with a small annual pension. The prior received a pension of £8 per year. William Lycheton, the monk of Cowick who for more than fifteen years had conducted the services held at Oldridge chapel, received a little over £5; Richard Gregory, who had been at Cowick in the late 1520s but had since returned to Tavistock, received £6. The pensions were less generous than the allowances which had been paid to the monks before the dissolution; in 1537 John Coter's allowance as prior had been more than £17. Nevertheless William Lycheton was still drawing his pension in 1555, in the reign of Queen Mary.⁽⁸⁴⁾

(82) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/52/7-9; W1258M/G4/52/11.

(83) H. P. R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey* (Cambridge, 1951), pp.266-7; Public Record Office [The National Archives], E322/236.

(84) W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vol.2 (London, 1819), pp.492, 503; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/2, 8-9, 23-4, 28-9 Hen.VIII.