

2. The Buildings of Cowick Priory

The site which the monks chose for their priory was very close to where the Cowick Barton inn now stands. The priory church was probably a little to the east of the inn (i.e. on the side overlooking Barton fields).⁽³⁾ No doubt this spot was selected because of the natural spring nearby, and because the land was raised a little above the flood plain. It is not unlikely that Baldwin's home farm was already established at Cowick Barton before the priory was built there.

We do not know how long the building work was in progress, nor the exact date when it was finished, but through the chance survival of some early documents a little is known about the circumstances in which the priory buildings were erected. Because of their poverty, the prior and monks of Cowick made an appeal for contributions "to the building of the church of the blessed Andrew, which on the authority and advice of the lord bishop we have now begun anew".⁽⁴⁾

These words may mean that the construction of the church had been commenced, abandoned through lack of funds, and then started afresh at a later date. At any rate, the monks undertook to offer masses for those who contributed, and Bishop William Warelwast (bishop of Exeter from 1107 to 1137) gave his support to the venture by granting indulgences to all who visited Cowick with their alms. By about 1150, when one of Baldwin's descendants made a gift before the altar, the building of the church was probably completed.⁽⁴⁾

The conventional church of the priory was not large; as far as we can tell it possessed no elaborate architectural detail apart from a rich tiled floor installed in the sanctuary during the 14th century. Most of the tiles depicted the arms of the Courtenay family, earls of Devon from 1335, who were heirs of Baldwin de Brionne and lay patrons of the priory.⁽⁵⁾

In 1325 the only ornaments in the church were those needed for the daily offices, but by the end of the 15th century the church seems to have possessed a considerable quantity of books, ornaments and furniture. In 1485 the sum of 116 shillings and 11 pence was spent on ornaments for the church, including the making and painting of an image of Jesus with a crucifix; the purchase of a bible, and the repair of some of the existing books. By the 1480s the priory church of Cowick also possessed a clock, and a number of bells in the tower.⁽⁵⁾

Besides the church the priory buildings in the 15th century included the cloisters, the chapter house where the monks assembled when there was administrative business to transact, a hall, parlour, kitchen and great chamber. Presumably the chamber was where the monks slept, while the hall and parlour were for daytime use. In the early part of the century there was also a room known as the "Erles chamber", with fittings of considerable value, which may have been kept for the use of the earl of Devon when he visited Cowick.⁽⁶⁾

In the first years of the priory some of the buildings may have been constructed of cob or timber, but by the beginning of the 16th century most (perhaps all) were of stone. When repairs were needed, red sandstone was bought from the quarries at Peamore and Kenn. At this time the priory buildings had tiled or slate roofs, and interior walls of lath and plaster, washed with lime. Not only the church, but also the hall and parlour had glazed windows; the glass in the two parlour windows was fitted in 1473 at a cost of 3 shillings and 4 pence.⁽⁷⁾

Around the main buildings of the priory stood a number of others, notably the granges where produce was stored. There were also stables, a dovecote (to provide pigeons to eat in winter when other food was scarce), gardens and a fishpond.⁽⁸⁾

To the south-east lay the priory's orchard, and somewhere nearby stood the pound house where the apples were turned into cider. The precinct was surrounded by thatched cob walls, and to enter it travellers passed through the great gateway described in 1470 as "le Porche de Cowyke". It is no longer possible to discover the exact locations of the priory's various buildings, but we may safely assume that the great gateway faced onto the ancient thoroughfare, now called Cowick Lane, which in the middle ages was known as Monkyn Lane: the lane of the monks.⁽⁸⁾

(3) *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), pp.321-6.

(4) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/6; British Library, Campbell Charters VIII.11.

(5) *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), pp.324-5; Public Record Office [The National Archives], E106/6/13/34; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/2.

(6) Public Record Office [The National Archives], C145/308/11; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 9-10, 12-13 Edw.IV.

(7) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 9-10, 12-13 Edw.IV; W1258M/G53/4, 17-18 Edw.IV; W1258M/G4/53/3, 20 Hen.VII; W1258M/G4/53/2, 19-20 Hen.VIII.

(8) Public Record Office [The National Archives], C145/308/11; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 2-3, 3-4, 9-10, 14-15 Edw.IV; W1258M/G4/53/2, 2 Ric.III-1 Hen.VII, 4-5 Hen.VII, 20-1 Hen.VIII; *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), p.324.