

3. The Monks and the Local Community

Outside the priory gate lay the manorial lands of Cowick and Exwick, which provided the income for the support of the monks. Everyone who lived in Cowick or Exwick was to a greater or lesser extent a dependant of the priory. Each family owed some form of payment (whether labour services or money) which directly or indirectly contributed to the maintenance of the monastic life. In the 12th century these dues and services were administered by the reeve, who was probably selected by the tenants from among themselves, but by 1325 the prior of Cowick was employing a salaried bailiff to do this work.⁽⁹⁾

The Prior's steward held manor courts at which he admitted tenants and dealt with minor offences. Serious misdemeanours also occurred from time to time, as in June 1466 when Henry Bonsale was presented to the court for making a violent assault on William Pyers of Over Barley;⁽¹⁰⁾ but most of the court's business in the 15th century was concerned with trivial matters such as illicit selling of beer or failure to repair ditches and water-courses. At this period the manor court of Cowick was generally held twelve or thirteen times a year. Although Cowick and Exwick were originally separate manors, the steward held a single court with jurisdiction over both places; with the passage of time the two manors came to be administered as one.

The limits of the medieval manor of Cowick were not precisely those of the area which we now call St Thomas. There were some places within the locality where the writ of the prior's court did not run. Most of the area which today lies between Buddle Lane, Cowick Street and the river Exe then belonged to one of the prebendaries who officiated in the chapel of St Mary in Exeter castle; and this property, which was known as the prebend of Hayes, lay outside the jurisdiction of Cowick manor. The land between Alphington Street and the river was for many centuries the home of a family called Floyer who enjoyed a privileged position, owing no submission to the manor court of Cowick; and there were other smaller properties which belonged not to the prior's manor of Cowick but to the earl of Devon's manor of Exe Island.⁽¹¹⁾

Nevertheless the priory possessed the lordship over by far the largest part of what is now St Thomas. It is likely that in the early years of the priory most of the inhabitants of Cowick were villeins, bound by their serfdom to spend the whole of their lives in the place of their birth. They could not leave the manor to earn a living elsewhere; they probably could not marry without paying a fine to the prior.

In 1086, when the Domesday survey was compiled, there were no free men in Cowick; but during the 12th century the privileges of personal freedom, already enjoyed by many in other parts of England, were gradually extended to some of the villeins of Devon. One of the few records that survive from 12th century Cowick is a notice that the freedom of a man called Alfrith had been bought "of Regenold the monk at Cowick for five shillings, to be free of subjection to the manor of Cowick". This transaction probably took place in the 1120s or 1130s. Regenold, described simply as "the monk", may have been one of the first priors of Cowick, or even the agent chosen by the abbot of Bec to supervise the foundation of the new priory. Alfrith's freedom was witnessed by Edmaer the priest, Edwin the reeve, and others. The document ends with a solemn warning: "May he have God's curse who ever shall undo this deed. Amen."⁽¹²⁾

As in other manors throughout England, so in Cowick the lands of the manor fell into two distinct groups: the demesne, which was at the disposal of the prior, and the so-called "customary" lands, which

were occupied by tenants according to the custom of the manor. In the 13th century, if not earlier, a third category was created when the priors began to sell parts of their land. The purchasers, such as Richard le Espetier who bought land in Cowick from Prior Maurice in the 1240s, were required to make an annual payment to the priory and to attend the manor court twice yearly; in return they acquired freehold tenancies in perpetuity.⁽¹³⁾

The men who bought these lands were not villeins, in personal subjection to the prior as lord of the manor. Richard le Espetier was probably a leading citizen of Exeter, perhaps a member of the mayor's council. Another freehold tenancy in the mid 13th century was held by Peter Quinil, a native of Exeter who later became its bishop.⁽¹³⁾

As time passed many of the other tenants of the manor must have gained their personal freedom in one way or another. In 1325 there were still ten tenants in serfdom on the manor of Cowick, but the other twentyfour were all free men. These must have included some who occupied "customary" properties, as well as the more distinguished individuals who enjoyed freehold tenancies.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the later middle ages it was the varying kinds of tenancy in Cowick that distinguished one man from another; the disabilities of the villeins ceased to be enforced and the question of personal freedom or serfdom lost its significance.

Throughout the middle ages almost all the land in Cowick that was fit for the purpose was given over to agriculture. It is probable that during the early years of the priory's existence substantial efforts were made to reclaim land from the waste and from the marsh, in order that it might be put to agricultural use. In the 1320s some 88 acres of the demesne were farmed by the monks themselves, using the labour of hired men or of such tenants as owed them labour services. The land was used for the pasture of sheep and other animals, and for growing crops.⁽¹⁴⁾

When the priory's possessions were assessed in January 1325 the monks owned 4 horses, 11 oxen, 116 sheep (including 40 lambs born in the last season and 16 born the year before), 41 pigs and 3 peafowl. They possessed a substantial quantity of oats, and lesser amounts of wheat, barley, rye, beans and peas, stored in the grange.⁽¹⁴⁾

There was also a considerable proportion of the demesne which in the 14th century was no longer kept in hand by the monks, but was leased to tenants for terms of years. In the autumn of 1388 the prior leased six acres of Cowick marsh to Richard Bozoun, an Exeter wool shipper; and in December 1397 two further acres in Cowick marsh, a field called "Bernehay", six acres at Exwick beside the road called the Greneway, and a portion of meadow beside Calabere weir were all leased to William Chaddere for fifteen years.⁽¹⁵⁾

Richard Bozoun, who was several times mayor of Exeter and who also had lands in Topsham and Alphington, probably wanted land in Cowick only to sub-let it; but as William Chaddere was described in 1412 as a "parishioner" of Cowick⁽¹⁶⁾ it is likely that he required land for his own occupation. His lease stated that he was to pay 18 shillings annual rent and to attend the manor court of Cowick every Michaelmas and Easter.

At Exwick the priory owned a corn mill, which in the 15th and 16th centuries was operated by a tenant miller. The monks were entitled to one-tenth of all the grain that passed through the miller's hands. In early times they probably collected the levy in the form of ground corn, but in later years the corn was

retained by the miller who then made a money payment to the priory: thus in 1517 Henry Loveryng, the miller at Exwick, was paying 5 shillings yearly in lieu of tenths from the mill.⁽¹⁷⁾

The mill buildings which now survive in a semi-derelict state at Exwick date only from the end of the 19th century, but they stand on a site that was probably first used for milling about eight hundred years ago. Although a mill existed in Exwick in 1086 at the time of the Domesday survey, we do not know where it stood. In 1189 the monks of Cowick priory planned the construction of the weir and mill leat which can still be seen today. In that year the monks acquired from the citizens of Exeter two acres of land on the further bank of the Exe, which enabled them to construct a weir across the river, and thus to divert water into the Exwick mill leat. A mill on the present site was probably built at the same time.⁽¹⁸⁾



*The mill leat at Exwick, constructed by the monks of Cowick priory in or shortly after 1189;
photographed in 2024*

[photograph by Geoffrey Yeo]

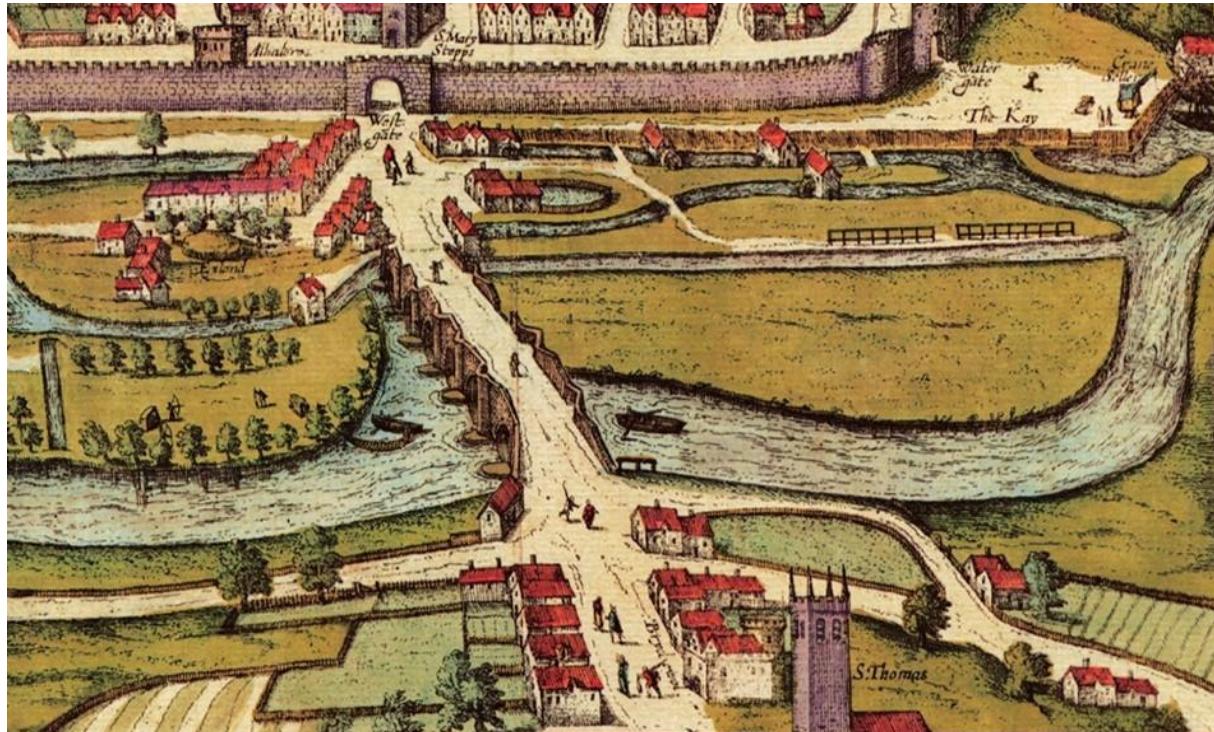
Throughout the middle ages the monks were responsible for the upkeep of this mill and of the weir. In 1482 the expense of maintaining Exwick mill amounted only to 27 shillings and 1 penny for the whole year, but in 1498 the cost came to over 100 shillings; the bills included one for 13 shillings and 6 pence for the purchase of new mill stones, and another for 10 shillings for carriage of the stones “from the moor” to Exwick.⁽¹⁸⁾

There were also mills at Cowick belonging to the Courtenay family. Here the miller was entitled to one loaf of bread for every eight bushels of corn brought to the mill, and two gallons of beer whenever he

ground malt for brewing. The site of these mills is unknown, but archaeological excavations in 1984 showed that the mill leat ran parallel to what is now Cowick Street. The leat was on the south side of the roadway and joined the river near the old Exe Bridge. Towards the end of the 13th century the right to collect the tenths of these mills was given to the monks of Cowick priory by Hugh Courtenay.⁽¹⁹⁾ The leat was filled in around the year 1400, and evidently the mills themselves were closed at the same time; there is no later record of their existence.⁽²⁰⁾

When the monks first came to Cowick, the road leading westwards from the riverbank towards Dunsford was merely a sunken lane or “hollow way” through the countryside. In the early years of the 13th century, through the efforts of an Exeter merchant named Nicholas Gervase, a new stone bridge was built across the river Exe. Access to and from the city thus became much easier, and this, together with the growing population of the area, made Cowick an attractive site for housing development. The first houses in what we now call Cowick Street were built sometime around the year 1200, and by the 1320s a substantial number had been constructed.⁽²⁰⁾

The community which grew up around the new Exe bridge was no longer a purely agricultural one. There were potters and bakers, carpenters, smiths and plumbers at work in Cowick in the 13th and early 14th centuries. By about 1270 the name Cowick Street was in use to describe the main thoroughfare of the locality.⁽²¹⁾ Although the roads towards Alphington and Whitestone were still largely unbuilt on, ribbon development along Cowick Street soon reached for a considerable distance westwards from the riverbank. The proximity of Cowick to the city of Exeter doubtless encouraged this growth. Further building became possible in the 15th century when the mill leat was filled in. The process of change from village to suburb had begun.



Cowick Street and the Exe Bridge in the 16th century

[from a map of Exeter (1587), in Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, vol.6 (Cologne, 1617)]

(9) *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 69 (1937), p.435 (reeve); Public Record Office [The National Archives], E106/6/13/12 (bailiff).

(10) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/50/1.

(11) *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), p.321; J. K. Foyer, *Pedigree of the Family of Foyer* (no date); J. Hoker, *Description of the Citiie of Excester*, ed. Harte and others (Exeter, 1919), part 3, pp.715-16.

(12) *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, ed. Chambers and others (London, 1933), fo.6a.

(13) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/11-12; B. Wilkinson and R. C. Easterling, *The Medieval Council of Exeter* (Manchester, 1931), pp.1-2, 64.

(14) Public Record Office [The National Archives], E106/6/13/8, 12, 34.

(15) *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1385-9*, p.522; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/D83/6.

(16) G. Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter, 1846), pp.157-9.

(17) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 8-9 Hen.VIII.

(18) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/26; W1258M/G4/53/4, 21-2 Edw.IV; W1258M/G4/53/5.

(19) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], ED/M/161; W1258M/G4/13.

(20) Archaeological Field Unit exhibit, St Thomas library, 1984.

(21) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/20-1; W1258M/G4/53/5; W1258M/G4/14-15.