

4. The Founding of St Thomas Church

When the priory church of St Andrew, Cowick, was built in the early 1100s, it was the only place of worship in the locality. Although primarily used by the monks for their daily offices, it also served as a parish church for the local community. While we do not know exactly what arrangements were made, it is likely that part of the nave was set aside for the use of parishioners.

Sometime towards the end of the century, however, a separate chapel was built for the parishioners of Cowick. This chapel was erected about three-quarters of a mile away from the priory, at the western end of the old timber bridge across the river Exe. It stood, not on the bridge itself, but on or near the corner of the road leading to Alphington, close to the spot where the Cowick mill leat joined the river.⁽²²⁾ The site of the chapel is difficult to locate today because of the extensive redevelopment of the area.

The chapel was dedicated to St Thomas Becket, who was canonised in February 1173, two years after his death in Canterbury cathedral; and the first mention of its existence is in a deed of Bishop John “le Chaunter” of Exeter which can be dated to 1190 or 1191. Thus, although the date of its construction is not recorded, it is certain that the chapel must have been built during the later 1170s or 1180s.⁽²²⁾

The chapel of St Thomas by Exe Bridge was served at first by chaplains appointed by the monks of the priory.⁽²³⁾ A system of this kind was not unusual, but a chaplain had no security of tenure and no guarantee of a regular income; if he departed the local community could not be certain that he would be replaced.

In 1261 Bishop Bronescombe of Exeter introduced a new means of providing for the pastoral care of the parishioners of Cowick. Stating that “in the church of Cowick where my beloved sons the prior and monks thereof serve the will of God, before our time no vicar has been ordained who might take care of the common people of the parish...”, he appointed a man named Henry as the first vicar of Cowick.⁽²⁴⁾ The difference between the vicar’s status and that of the earlier chaplains was that Henry enjoyed a tenure for life, and was entitled to part of the income of the benefice. The monks were to provide a vicarage house where he might live; and in due course it would be their responsibility to choose his successor.

Although Henry was appointed vicar of “the church of Cowick”, he performed his duties not in the priory church but in the chapel of St Thomas by Exe Bridge. He and his successors ministered there for almost a century and a half.

We can catch occasional glimpses of their activities – though as a rule we know only of those occasions when something happened to disturb their usual routine. Thus in 1342 the prior and monks of Cowick objected to the vicar taking away wax offered as an oblation in the chapel; and the dispute was taken to the bishop of Exeter’s consistory court. A few years later disagreements arose between the priory and William de Skeryngton, vicar of Cowick from 1345 to 1349, over the vicar’s stipend and the entitlement to sums of money from parishioners when they died. In 1347 Skeryngton claimed that his vicarage was “so weak and slender” that it was insufficient for his maintenance, and he seems to have won his case for an increased stipend; but two years later he had to agree that he would not impede the priory’s claim to revenue from deceased parishioners. However recorded cases of this kind are few, and we may assume that in general the relationship between the monks and the vicar was reasonably cordial.⁽²⁵⁾

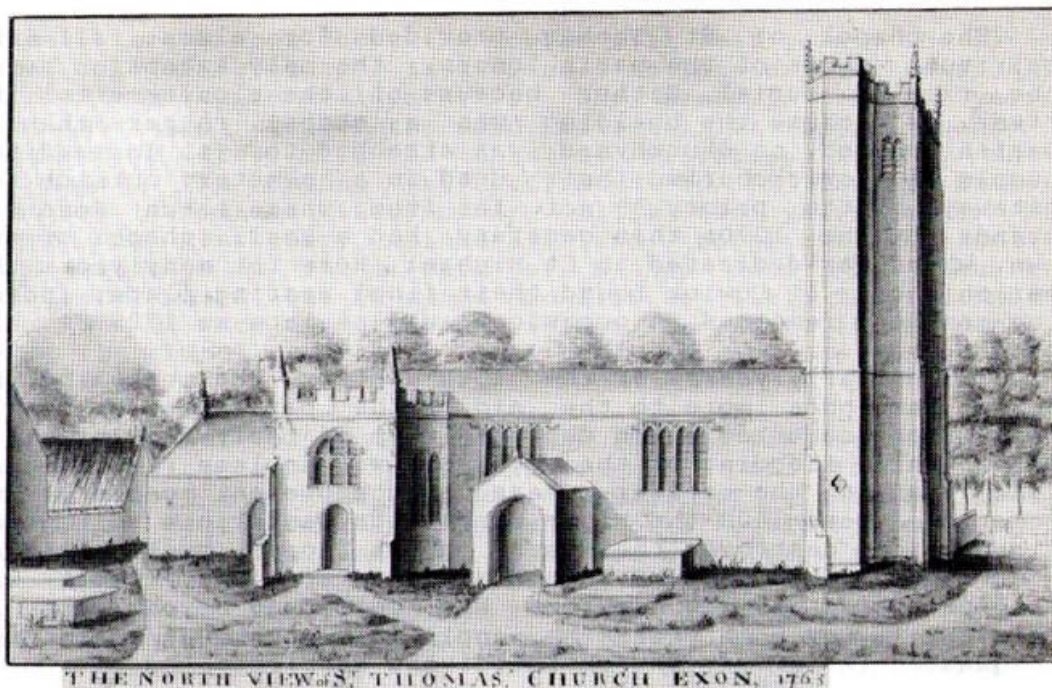
The chapel of St Thomas provided for almost all the spiritual needs of the parishioners, the only exception being the rite of burial. Either because of the closeness of the river, or because the building was a chapel rather than a parish church, no churchyard was attached to it. Instead the people of Cowick buried their dead in a cemetery outside the gateway of the priory, not far from where Larch Road now stands. By the 1270s this cemetery had a small chapel of its own, which was dedicated to St Michael. Here for many years the parishioners of Cowick found their final resting place; indeed the cemetery remained in occasional use as late as 1729.⁽²⁶⁾

In the early years of the 15th century the monks of the priory came once more to the aid of the parishioners, when a catastrophe occurred which deprived them of their regular place of worship. Sometime about 1400, the river burst its banks in a torrential flood, which destroyed the chapel of St Thomas by Exe Bridge. According to Bishop Stafford's register, the chapel was upturned from its foundations, and collapsed beyond hope of recovery.^(26a) For some years the people of Cowick must again have frequented the priory church for divine service.

Prior John de Bourgeauville and the monks of the priory resolved to provide a piece of land away from the river for the building of a new parish church. The land which they gave was known as "Pyryhay"; it was part of the demesne land of Cowick manor, on the south side of Cowick Street about a quarter of a mile from the river bank. The parish church of St Thomas still stands on this site today.

In asking Bishop Stafford to consecrate the new building, the monks and the representatives of the parishioners stated that the people of the locality would find it much easier to attend the new parish church than to go to the church of the priory, and the vicar would more freely be able to administer the sacraments there; for unlike the priory, the new church was situated in the middle of the parish. Moreover, they said, the monks wished to lead a life of prayer and contemplation, which was not possible while they were disturbed by the comings and goings of the common people.^(26a)

So the bishop consecrated the new church on 4 October 1412. He granted indulgences to all penitents who visited the church on that day, and he returned on the following day to consecrate the churchyard.^(26a)



St Thomas parish church: an 18th century view

[from a print in St Thomas church vestry]

The possession of a churchyard meant that the parishioners no longer had to bury their dead in the old cemetery at the priory gate. At the consecration the bishop laid down that the parishioners would still be responsible for any maintenance needed at the old cemetery, and that those who wished could still be buried there; but the usual burial place would now be in the churchyard in Cowick Street, “or in the church itself for any whose piety or rank should require it”.^(26a)

Like its predecessor, the new church was dedicated to St Thomas Becket. Unlike the old chapel, however, it was a parish church in its own right; from October 1412 the priory church ceased to be the parish church of Cowick. By common consent the name of the parish also changed. Within a few years the people of the area had begun to speak of themselves as living, not in Cowick, but in the parish of St Thomas the Martyr.

(22) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], ED/M/95; W1258M/G4/28; W1258M/G6/46.

(23) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/D82/1; W1258M/G4/24-5; W1258M/G6/47.

(24) Register of Bishop Bronescombe, ed. Hingeston-Randolph (London, 1889), p.127.

(25) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/9-10; W1258M/G6/48; *Calendar of Close Rolls 1346-9*, pp.191-2.

(26) Register of Bishop Bronescombe, ed. Hingeston-Randolph (London, 1889), p.59; *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), pp.323-4.

(26a) G. Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter, 1846), pp.157-9.