

5. The Religious Life of the Monks

The rule of St Benedict required that part of each monk's day should be devoted to work and part to sacred reading; of equal importance was attendance at prayer in the conventional church. Divine service was to be maintained in the monastery every day throughout the year; and although the records are largely silent on this point we must imagine that for the most part the monks of Cowick observed the rule as matter of routine down the centuries.

From the last years of the priory's existence there are records of money being spent on bread and wine for the mass, and on the purchase of a new missal; in 1489 we read of payments for ringing the bells at matins and vespers.⁽²⁷⁾ But by this time the religious life at Cowick had been established for 350 years; the sound of the priory bells will have been heard in the locality long before they are first mentioned in the records which now survive.

The daily lives of the monks are almost entirely unknown. The records tell us a little about the personalities of some of the priors: Adam de Buris (1275-c.1292) was much loved by the inhabitants of Cowick, William de Porta (c.1302-1315) was unreliable, William Donnebant (1420-1446) had enemies in the locality.⁽²⁸⁾ But there is only one monk whose religious experience is recorded; he was a man named Walter, who was born in Norwich but seems to have spent most of his life as a monk of Cowick priory. Walter had a vision of the terrors of purgatory, and thereafter wore a hair shirt for the rest of his days. It appears that his life was of such holiness that he was venerated as a saint after his death.⁽²⁹⁾ Walter probably died before 1200 (we do not know exactly when), but the legend of his sanctity continued to play a part in the religious life of the priory as late as the 15th century.

We know that there were "sacred relics" which could be seen at Cowick in the first years of the priory. Early in the 12th century Bishop William Warewast granted an indulgence to all who visited these relics, but we are not told what they were. In later times it was the relics of Walter himself which provided an attraction for pilgrims, and the feast of St Walter became an important date in the priory's calendar.

In 1467 the monks of Cowick spent 6 shillings and 6 pence on St Walter's day. One shilling paid for the hire of two men to look after the pilgrims, while the rest of the money was expended on bread and beer for the festival. In the previous year 5 shillings and 2 pence had been spent "for making and binding of a new box to saint Walter": the priory church evidently contained a shrine of some kind in which Walter's bones were preserved.⁽³⁰⁾

Our only other information about religious observance at Cowick concerns the position of the Courtenay family as lay patrons and benefactors of the priory. As representatives of the founder, the Courtenays were long entitled to a place of special prominence in the prayers of the monks. Hugh Courtenay, who died in 1291, chose to be buried at Cowick priory, and Bishop Byton of Exeter approved an indulgence to all who prayed for his soul.⁽³¹⁾

Fifty years later, in February 1341, a further Courtenay burial took place at Cowick. The dead man, another Hugh Courtenay, was the first of that name to hold the earldom of Devon. After a procession from Exeter cathedral, the funeral service was held with great ceremony, in the presence of a number of abbots and local dignitaries. The sermon was preached by Bishop Grandisson, who took his text from the first book of Chronicles: "He died in ripe old age, full of years, wealth and honour".⁽³¹⁾

After this, there were no more Courtenay burials at Cowick. Indeed, those members of the powerful Courtenay family who chose to be buried in such an insignificant church may have done so only because they had quarrelled with monks of their usually favoured abbey at Ford.⁽³²⁾

But the Courtenays ensured that they were not forgotten at Cowick. In 1343 the new earl of Devon made an agreement with the prior and monks: he would provide £100 to release them from a financial obligation to the abbot of Bec, and in return the monks would find one of their number to celebrate a daily mass for the earl himself and for the souls of his parents and grandparents. In addition a special commemoration, to be attended by the prior and all the monks of Cowick, was to be held in June and December every year on the anniversaries of the deaths of the earl's parents.⁽³³⁾

As part of the agreement the earl of Devon made a further stipulation, for assistance to be given to the poor. It was already the custom for the prior to distribute grain every year on 29 November, the day before the feast of St Andrew in the church calendar; now the earl laid down that the prior should give one penny to each of two hundred poor people on the days of special commemoration in June and December, and five loaves of bread to the poor on each day of the year.⁽³⁴⁾

(27) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/2, 4-5 Hen.VII; W1258M/G4/53/3, 20 Hen.VII.

(28) See chapter 6, 'The Monks and the Church Authorities', page 15, and chapter 7, 'The Priory in Crisis', page 19.

(29) D. H. Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1978), p.398.

(30) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/6; W1258M/G4/53/1, 5-6, 6-7 Edw.IV.

(31) G. Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter, 1846), p.155 and Additional Supplement p.16.

(32) S. Wood, *English Monasteries and Their Patrons* (Oxford, 1955), p.161.

(33) Public Record Office [The National Archives], E159/179, Michaelmas mem.8.

(34) Public Record Office [The National Archives], E106/6/13/12; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1399-1401*, p.252.