

6. The Monks and the Church Authorities

The priors of Cowick had to serve a variety of masters. They had to meet the demands of the Crown, and those of their patrons. But in the 13th century the claims most difficult to reconcile were those of the bishop of Exeter and the abbot of Bec. Both sought jurisdiction over the priory: it lay within the bishop's diocese, but the abbot saw Cowick as a daughter house of his own monastery.

In the priory's early years the demands made by the abbot were moderate. The appointment, and perhaps the removal, of both prior and monks were in his hands; but in 1200 when the abbot visited England and obtained oaths of obedience from his other dependent priories in East Anglia and Monmouthshire, he apparently did not trouble to seek any similar promises from Cowick.⁽³⁵⁾

Practical authority rested with the bishop of Exeter: it was he who supported the monks' appeal for money to build their church, who granted them exemption from ecclesiastical dues and customs, and who in the 1170s or thereabouts gave them a charter of confirmation of their property.⁽³⁵⁾

Nevertheless the monks of Cowick must always have felt that their overriding loyalty was to the abbots of Bec who had sent them to England. During the 13th century the abbots began to seek closer control over their English priories. At the beginning of the century Abbot Richard de St Leger began the practice of convening general chapters at Bec, which all the priors of the order were expected to attend. At these chapters the priors were asked to report on the affairs of their priories; later they were also required to submit their accounts for approval. In this way the abbot hoped to maintain his authority, and to ensure that the English priories remained loyal to the customs and practices of the order of Bec.⁽³⁶⁾

In 1300 Abbot Ymerius wrote to the prior of Cowick and to the other priors of the order in England, drawing attention to their long-standing failure to attend the general chapter. If difficulties prevented them from making the voyage to France, he said, they should at least send a written account of the state of their priories; otherwise he feared that the abbots of English monasteries would attempt to gain control over them. In fact it seems that the priors of Cowick continued to attend the general chapter whenever they could; Prior Eustace de Pont l'Évêque went to France in 1317, presumably to attend the chapter, and his successor did the same in 1331.⁽³⁷⁾

It was perhaps inevitable that the abbots of Bec, in attempting to maintain control of Cowick priory, would come into conflict with the bishops of Exeter. One such dispute arose in the time of Peter Quinil, bishop from 1281 to 1292. It concerned Adam de Buris, who had been appointed prior of Cowick in 1275. The abbot wanted to transfer him to another priory, and had sent to England a monk named Reginald de St Mélain, who was to succeed him at Cowick. However Bishop Quinil refused to allow this. Insisting that the right to remove a prior was his and not the abbot's, the bishop was adamant that Prior de Buris should remain in office; for, he said, the prior was so beloved by the inhabitants of the district that he could not be sent away without serious harm to the house of Cowick.⁽³⁸⁾

In practice the bishop's authority was considerable. When a prior wished to cross the sea to visit the mother house at Bec, he could do so only if the bishop granted him a licence; when he resigned or died, the bishop would assume control of the priory's income until a successor was appointed; and in common with many of the French priories in England, Cowick was subject to inspection by the bishop of the diocese when he held a formal visitation.⁽³⁸⁾ In 1316 Prior Eustace de Pont l'Évêque complained to his abbot about Bishop Stapeldon's conduct at the last visitation; but when notice of another visitation

was sent after the bishop's death the prior replied acknowledging the document which cited him to appear, and promising obedience.⁽³⁹⁾

Relations between the priory and the bishop's palace were clearly at a low ebb in the early years of the 14th century. In 1315 Prior William de Porta packed his bags and left the priory, without troubling to inform the bishop; and Bishop Stapeldon in turn recorded his view that the prior of Cowick, in deserting his priory, had acted rashly and without any reasonable cause. Although at the time of his induction he had been enjoined not to leave his priory without licence from the bishop of Exeter, Prior de Porta had taken himself off to another place, and the bishop knew not where.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Writing about these events shortly afterwards, Prior Eustace de Pont l'Évêque took exception to the way in which Bishop Stapeldon had found fault with his predecessor; in his view it was mere illwill against the prior that had led the bishop to make public complaint about him in London to the abbot's representative.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The most delicate negotiations were needed when a new prior was to be appointed. The choice rested in the first instance with the abbot of Bec, but successive bishops of Exeter were at pains to establish that the abbot's nominee could not expect to assume office without the bishop's consent. In addition, the wishes of the Courtenay earls of Devon had to be taken into account. Sometimes the bishop could only be persuaded to admit the new prior after considerable difficulty, but eventually a procedure seems to have been worked out which satisfied all parties. The abbot selected the prior, and sent him to England with three documents: a letter of appointment, addressed to the new prior in person, and two letters of presentation, one to the earl of Devon as lay patron, and the other to the bishop.⁽⁴¹⁾

The latter needed to be carefully worded, as English bishops had sometimes rejected letters which presumed too much on their willingness to accept the abbot's nominee. Once the letters had been accepted, it was the bishop who formally instituted the newly arrived monk as prior of Cowick. The bishop received from the prior an oath of canonical obedience, saving only the rule of St Benedict. When the system worked smoothly there were no long delays: in 1420 William Donnebant received his appointment from the abbot on 13 September, and letters of presentation to the bishop of Exeter on 9 November. Eleven days later his presentation was accepted and he was instituted as prior.⁽⁴¹⁾

(35) *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), p.45; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/6; W1258M/G6/46; W1258M/D82/1.

(36) M. Morgan, *English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (Oxford, 1946), pp.13-19.

(37) A. Porée, *Histoire de l'Abbaye du Bec*, vol.2 (Evreux, 1901), p.219; Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.2 (Torquay, 1966), p.185.

(38) *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), pp.49-50.

(39) Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on Manuscripts in Various Collections*, vol.1 (London, 1901), p.274.

(40) Register of Bishop Stapeldon, ed. Hingeston-Randolph (London, 1892), p.204; *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), p.50.

(41) *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), pp.50-1; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/D82/15-17.

