

7. The Priory in Crisis

Cowick priory was never rich. At the time when it was built the funds available were insufficient to pay for the necessary work, and an appeal for money had to be made. When the first vicar of Cowick was appointed in 1261, the stipend which the monks were to pay him was set at 3 pounds 6 shillings and 8 pence because of the meagreness of the church's income. Later still, two centuries after its foundation, the priory possessed a single silver cup valued at 6 shillings, but all its other utensils were of brass, copper or wood.⁽⁴²⁾

The priory was not wholly without resources. Besides its original endowment of the manors of Cowick and Exwick, further land had been given to the priory before 1142, by the daughter and grandson of Baldwin de Brionne.⁽⁴³⁾ In the course of the 12th century and later, the priory acquired many small properties in other parts of Devon. More valuable were the rectories and advowsons of churches which the priory obtained. The one gave the monks a substantial part of the income, from tithes and other sources, of several parish churches in Devon; the other gave them the right to appoint the parish priest. In comparison with some larger monastic houses, Cowick priory possessed few of these so-called "spiritual" properties. Nevertheless in the 13th and 14th centuries the rectories of Spreyton, Christow and Okehampton belonged to Cowick, as well as the tiny church at Oldridge, six miles to the west of Exeter.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The priory's most valuable acquisition, however, was the manor of Christow, which had belonged to the abbey of Bec since the time of William the Conqueror. In the summer of 1244 the abbot decided that this manor should be held by the monks of Cowick. The manor was no more than seven miles from Cowick priory, which already possessed Christow rectory. In return the monks were to pay a yearly rent of 18 marks (£12).⁽⁴⁵⁾

Even after 1244 Cowick priory was far from lavishly endowed. In the year 1289 the priory's income from all sources was a little over £47. In 1294 it was slightly less than £54. Since the priory's annual expenses, apart from the £12 payment for Christow, amounted to more than £40 in 1301, it seems that the monks could barely manage to remain solvent.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The wars between England and France which began in the latter part of the 13th century created further problems for the monks of Cowick. They brought financial difficulties as well as weakening the ties with the mother house of Bec, and were eventually to lead to the ruin of the buildings at Cowick and the closure of the priory. In 1295, shortly after the outbreak of war, the king ordered the seizure of all property belonging to foreign monks in England. All the possessions of Bec were confiscated; monks whose houses were within thirteen leagues of the sea or a navigable river (and this must have included Cowick) were forced to move inland. The king's instructions were that they should send no letters or messages, nor speak to strangers; if found going about the countryside, they were liable to be arrested.⁽⁴⁷⁾

For several months the property remained in the hands of guardians. Eventually the monks were allowed to return, but only because they agreed to make substantial payments to the royal exchequer. They had to pay almost £27 for the return of their properties in Cowick; in addition they were required to give the king the sum of £12 which would normally have been forwarded to Bec as rent for Christow. Furthermore the king demanded that similar sums should be paid every year thereafter.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The financial state of the priories in England did not allow the monks to find such large sums of money. In the first year the prior of Cowick was somehow able to produce the amount demanded, but before long the payments had fallen into arrears. Eventually the king decided that he was satisfied with the money that he had been able to raise (more than £5000 in total from the various English dependencies of the abbey of Bec), and agreed to excuse the priors from further payments.⁽⁴⁸⁾

However the wars with France continued, and the king was unable to tolerate for long the presence in England of “alien” monasteries whose priors might send money across the channel. In 1307 the priors were forbidden to send any money out of the realm; and in 1324 the property belonging to Cowick and the other alien priories was again confiscated. This time still larger payments were demanded before it could be returned. Cowick was asked for £40, and in addition the king’s officers took away the priory’s grain and livestock.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Even when the properties of alien priors were restored to them, the king insisted that any money formerly sent abroad each year should instead be paid to the Crown. It is probable that by the 1340s the abbot of Bec rarely, if ever, received the annual sum of £12 due to him from Cowick. In 1343 he agreed to allow the priory to retain the manor of Christow, but relinquished his claim to a yearly rent, in return for a single payment of £100 from the earl of Devon.^(48a)

In the latter part of the 14th century, although the monks were permitted to remain in residence at Cowick, the priory’s revenues were continually subject to seizure. When this happened the entire income was retained by the king’s agents, apart from a small allowance to the monks for their food and subsistence. Thus with each confiscation the priory was faced with an ever deepening financial crisis.

In 1399, as a gesture of goodwill, the king restored all the alien priors to their property, and on 12 February 1400 Prior John de Bourgeauville was formally given control over the revenues of his own priory of Cowick. Even then some uncertainty arose: the restoration had been made subject to the usual condition that the Crown should receive any money formerly due to a mother house in France, and John de Bourgeauville had to show proof that the payments once sent from Cowick to Bec had been commuted in 1343. The king then agreed for twenty years he would exempt the priory from making any payment to the Crown.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The wars naturally made it more difficult for the monks to maintain close links with the abbey of Bec, and for new priors to assume office with letters of presentation from the abbot. Regular attendance at the general chapter in France became impossible; the supply of monks coming to reside at Cowick was also in increasing jeopardy. In 1304, at the start of the troubles, Abbot Ymerius had ruled that no monk of Bec should reside continuously in England for more than six years; but the rule very soon became unenforceable. Three of the priors of Cowick appointed during the 14th century remained in office for at least fifteen years.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Eventually some of the difficulties were resolved by the pope, who in 1391 gave power to the abbot’s London proctor, the prior of Cowick and the bishop of London, jointly to convene a general chapter of the order of Bec in England. They were also empowered to appoint priors and to receive the professions of monks. John de Bourgeauville, appointed prior of Cowick in 1398, was presented to his office by the bishop of London and William de St Vaast, proctor in England of the abbot of Bec.⁽⁵⁰⁾

The problem of maintaining the numbers of monks in the priory must have seemed insoluble. In 1301 there were five monks at Cowick besides the prior. By 1325 the number had fallen to four. As the wars dragged on, the numbers of monks in the English priories of Bec fell as their financial difficulties increased. Two of the smallest priories had ceased to house any monks at all by the end of the 14th century.⁽⁵¹⁾

In 1410 the prior of Cowick joined with the prior of Goldcliff in Monmouthshire in sending a petition to the king, stating that their priories were destitute of monks. In April of that year the two priors were granted permission to fetch some monks from Bec, and in 1412 the prior of Cowick was again given authority to send an agent to bring eight monks from France to reside in the English priories of the order. Although this may have brought about a temporary improvement, the problem of the shortage of monks was never to be satisfactorily resolved. In 1446 when Prior William Donnebant died there were only three monks left at Cowick; there had been a period around 1429 when the number of monks apart from the prior had fallen to just one.⁽⁵¹⁾

It is hardly surprising that successive priors of Cowick found it impossible to maintain the priory buildings in good order. In 1440 it was reported that John de Bourgeauville, who had been prior from 1398 to 1419, had allowed the "Erles chamber" at Cowick and the grange and mill at Exwick to become ruinous.⁽⁵²⁾

His successor William Donnebant had to contend with a yet more serious problem. In 1421 the twenty years' exemption from payments to the Crown had come to an end, and the king imposed an annual levy of 24 marks (£16). Faced with taxation on this scale, the prior simply could not find the money to keep the buildings in repair. During the next twenty years the priory church, the cloisters and many other parts of the priory fell into decay. In 1440 the prior announced that the condition of the buildings was so weak that they were about to fall down; the royal levy was preventing the repair work that would be essential if divine service at Cowick were not to cease.⁽⁵²⁾

Prior Donnebant also had to contend with suspicion and hostility from at least some of his English neighbours. We do not know who his accusers were; but a story was put about that in November 1421 the prior had gone to the house of John Hulle in Exeter, where he had seized a servant girl named Hugona. The girl was said to have been taken to Cowick where she was raped. Bishop Lacy had the case investigated and found Prior Donnebant innocent; moreover he stated that the prior was a man of good reputation, whose standing and conversation alike were faultless. The accusations, the bishop said, had been brought wickedly and maliciously.⁽⁵³⁾

In 1414 an act of Parliament had formally suppressed those alien priories which had no convent of monks. At first this measure had no effect in Cowick. In 1440 William Donnebant was able to inform the king that his priory was conventual; he and all his predecessors were perpetual priors, who had been duly inducted and instituted, and the priory had its own common seal. The king asked the bishop of Exeter to confirm whether this was true, and the bishop, after searching the records, was able to inform him that the priory was indeed conventual and still used a common seal as it had done time out of mind.⁽⁵⁴⁾



Deed of agreement, 13th century, with seal of Cowick priory attached

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Thus the continued existence of Cowick priory was assured for a little longer. Because of the crumbling state of the priory buildings, and because its possessions near the river Exe had been damaged by flooding, the king agreed to remit the levy of 24 marks which had been demanded since 1421.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Moreover the wars with France were almost at an end, and for a brief period it looked as if the priory might be safe.

Then on Palm Sunday, 14 April 1443, a disastrous fire broke out. The damage to the priory buildings was enormous, and all the livestock was destroyed. The cost of repair and replacement was estimated at over £177, far more than the monks would possibly be able to find.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Three years later Prior Donnebant died. He must have been a very disillusioned man.

On a summer day in 1446 the sub-prior, Thomas de Sainte Eugenie, and the two other remaining monks, John de Clarebeare and Richard Becco, met in the chapter house at Cowick. There they unanimously agreed to put forward the name of Robert de Rouen, a monk of the order of Bec, as the next prior of Cowick. The consent of the earl of Devon to this proposal had already been obtained. The election was somewhat irregular, since the right to appoint a new prior customarily belonged to the abbot of Bec; but by this date Cowick was the only priory of the order of Bec still surviving in England, and the monks probably thought that there was little chance of securing a nomination from the mother house in France. However by February 1447 they had obtained from the abbot a letter granting authority in the priory to Robert de Rouen.⁽⁵⁶⁾

The nomination was accepted by the bishop of Exeter and Robert de Rouen was instituted as prior on 22 April 1447. For four years he attempted to hold together his tiny community despite the crippling state of the priory's finances and the ruinous condition of its buildings.

In May 1451, however, came the news that the king intended to suppress Cowick priory under the legislation against those alien priories without a convent of monks; letters patent had been issued by which Cowick was to be added to the endowments of the newly-founded college at Eton in Buckinghamshire. A few days later Robert de Rouen asked the bishop of Exeter for a year's leave of absence from his priory; this was granted, on condition that he should appoint a proctor to act in his absence, and that divine service should still be maintained at the priory by day and by night, in accordance with the Benedictine rule.⁽⁵⁷⁾

No doubt he sought leave of absence in order to make an urgent journey to Bec, to seek the abbot's advice about what should be done. It would have been possible to contest the king's order on the grounds that Cowick was a conventual priory, and was thus exempt from the legislation under which its suppression had been announced. There is no record of the abbot's discussion with his prior; but doubtless they agreed that, in view of the priory's hopeless condition, there would be little point in attempting to resist.

In the autumn of 1451 Robert de Rouen was back in England. On 22 November he went to the provost's house at Eton and there, before a notary public and three witnesses, he announced his resignation. Shortly afterwards the bishop of Exeter formally exonerated him from all further responsibility for the affairs of the priory.⁽⁵⁸⁾

In the very last days of his sojourn in England the prior made a generous donation to the rebuilding of Spreyton church, which had belonged to Cowick priory for three hundred years past. The vicar of Spreyton, himself a native of Normandy, commemorated the event with an inscription in the church roof: "Henry le Maygne, vicar of this church, had this roof made in the year of our Lord 1451. Robert de Rouen, prior of Cowick, and Richard Talbot, lord of Spreyton, gave of their goods for the work. Pray for their souls." The inscription can still be seen in Spreyton church today. It is the only visible record of the monks of Cowick now remaining in any of the churches which once were theirs.⁽⁵⁹⁾



*Chancel roof in Spreyton church, with inscription recording its construction in 1451;
photographed in 2024*

[photograph by Geoffrey Yeo]

But the restoration work at Spreyton can scarcely have been started when the monks of Bec departed from Cowick. By the summer of 1452 the buildings of the priory were left empty and their former occupants had returned to France. It must have seemed that monastic life at Cowick had come to an end.

(42) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/6; G. Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter, 1846), p.155; Public Record Office [The National Archives], E106/6/13/34.

(43) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], ED/PP/3.

(44) Register of Bishop Grandisson, ed. Hingeston-Randolph, part 1 (London, 1894), p.59.

- (45) G. Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter, 1846), pp.156-7; *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), p.37.
- (46) A. Porée, *Histoire de l'Abbaye du Bec*, vol.1 (Evreux, 1901), p.463; M. Morgan, *English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (Oxford, 1946), pp.121-2.
- (47) *Calendar of Fine Rolls 1272-1307*, pp.362-4.
- (48) *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), pp.55-8.
- (48a) Public Record Office [The National Archives], E159/179, Michaelmas mem.8.
- (49) *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1399-1401*, pp.72, 252.
- (50) *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), p.47; M. Morgan, *English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (Oxford, 1946), p.127.
- (51) M. Morgan, *English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (Oxford, 1946), p.122; PRO E106/6/13/12; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1408-13*, pp.193, 364; Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.2 (Torquay, 1966), p.354; vol.4 (Torquay, 1971), p.123.
- (52) Public Record Office [The National Archives], C145/308/11; Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.2 (Torquay, 1966), pp.182-3.
- (53) Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.1 (Torquay, 1963), p.232.
- (54) Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.2 (Torquay, 1966), pp.182-7; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1436-41*, p.381.
- (55) Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.2 (Torquay, 1966), pp.310-11.
- (56) Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.2 (Torquay, 1966), pp.354-5; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/D82/20.
- (57) *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1467-77*, p.62; Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.3 (Torquay, 1968), p.112.
- (58) Register of Bishop Lacy, ed. Dunstan, vol.3 (Torquay, 1968), pp.142-3.
- (59) *Notes and Gleanings* 2 (1889), p.23.