

8. Return of the Monks

"The service of God was withdrawn, the church defouled with rude beasts, the place fallen in ruin and desolation, and the foundation broken to the huge displeasure of God." These evocative words were used by a contemporary observer to describe the unhappy state of Cowick priory a few years after the last of the French monks had left.⁽⁶⁰⁾

In 1452 the provost of Eton had a survey made of all the rents that would be due to him and his successors from his new tenants; this rental was to remain the basis of the administration of the Cowick estates for many years to come. But in the monastic life of Cowick priory the provost had no interest. Eton college was a secular foundation and the provost's intention was to use the revenues of Cowick to support the educational work at Eton, rather than to maintain a community of monks in Devonshire.

At the Benedictine abbey of Tavistock, however, Abbot John Dynyngton saw the weakness of the provost's position, and decided to see if he could secure possession of the priory of Cowick for his own abbey. He knew of the Church's canon which stated that "when once monasteries have been dedicated they must always remain monasteries... they can never again become secular habitations". He knew, too, that the legal grounds for the suppression of the priory in 1451 had been doubtful. "The said priory", he wrote, "was perpetual and conventional according to the exception of the Act [of 1414]... it might not stand with God's law nor man's law nor by good reason [for] the priory to be committed to secular use, but only to be occupied and served with religious men if any could be found."⁽⁶⁰⁾

However the destiny of Cowick priory ultimately depended on political and military events in the wars between the king, Henry VI, and his opponents of the house of York. The college at Eton had naturally been favoured by Henry VI, who was himself its founder. In 1461 Henry was deposed, and in July of the following year Cowick was taken away from Eton college by the new king, Edward IV. On 12 November 1462 Edward acceded to the request of Abbot Dynyngton, who had supported the Yorkist side in the wars, and granted the priory to Tavistock abbey.⁽⁶¹⁾

In this way the abbot and monks of Tavistock acquired not only the site and buildings of the priory, but also the manors of Cowick, Exwick and Christow, and all the other property that had once belonged to the priors of Cowick. The total income from these properties amounted in 1482 to about £103; the additional revenue added roughly one-sixth to the annual income of Tavistock abbey, and confirmed its position as the wealthiest monastery in Devon.⁽⁶¹⁾



The gatehouse of Tavistock abbey

[from a print by S. Fisher, 1830]

On his part, the abbot of Tavistock kept his promise that he would rescue Cowick priory from secular habitation. Within a few months of the issuing of the royal letters patent which granted the priory to Tavistock abbey, the “rude beasts” had been expelled from the church and there were once again monks in residence at Cowick. Divine service was resumed and the rule of St Benedict was again observed at the priory.

But from now on the monks of Cowick were to be Englishmen, whose allegiance was not to Bec but to Tavistock. The first two monks to live at Cowick under the new regime were called John Hayman and William Denbery. They arrived there on Easter Sunday, 10 April 1463. With them was a chaplain named John Yewan, whose task was doubtless the celebration of mass in the priory church.⁽⁶²⁾

In 1467 the provost of Eton secured letters patent which restored Cowick to Eton college; but it is clear from surviving records that the monks of Tavistock did not leave Cowick at this time, and the provost

was evidently unable to re-occupy the property. In 1478 the abbot of Tavistock sought a papal bull to confirm his title.⁽⁶³⁾

In fact during the later 1460s and throughout the 1470s there were at all times two monks from Tavistock living at Cowick priory. Later the number of monks at the priory was increased: from the 1480s there were always three, and sometimes a fourth.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The major task facing the monks at this period must have been the restoration of the decayed priory buildings. We do not have a complete account of the work undertaken, but some of the details are known. The bell-tower, where dirt and rubbish had probably accumulated during the previous ten years, was cleaned out in 1463. In addition the roofs of the priory church and some of the outbuildings were repaired, and a new cider-press constructed.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Further work was undertaken in 1465 or 1466, in the church, the stables and elsewhere; four years later the hall, cloister, kitchen and gatehouse all received attention. In 1476 or 1477 the old bell-tower was taken down and a new one built. The new tower itself had to be repaired some three years afterwards; at the same time repairs were made to St Walter's gate, which took its name from the saintly monk of earlier years.⁽⁶⁵⁾

The manors, rectories and other properties which had belonged to Cowick priory in former times were kept together as a group by the abbot of Tavistock, and were administered from Cowick on the abbot's behalf. The abbot continued the practice of appointing a single steward for the manorial courts of both Cowick and Christow. The steward was assisted by a clerk of the court who from 1464 took the title of sub-steward.

John More, steward of Cowick in 1463, Thomas Dowryssh, who succeeded him in 1464 and died in office twenty years later, and Sir Thomas Denys, steward in the 1520s and 1530s, were all prominent Devon landowners who had received a legal training. Each of them also held the recordership of the city of Exeter; Sir Thomas Denys was a privy councillor and steward of a number of monasteries in Devon. These men would not have been expected to devote their time to routine duties, and the bulk of the work was evidently undertaken by the sub-steward.

Rents from the abbot's properties were collected by the bailiffs of Cowick and Christow, who paid the balance of their accounts to one of the monks acting as receiver. From 1483 the receiver took over from the bailiff of Cowick manor the duty of making payments for building repairs, hire of labourers, the purchase of goods for the priory, and miscellaneous expenses. In the 1490s the practice of using a monk in this position ceased, and the abbot appointed a layman to combine the posts of receiver and sub-steward of Cowick. His name was John Thomas and he was to remain in office for about forty years.⁽⁶⁴⁾

After the revival of Cowick priory under the abbot of Tavistock its finances were generally much improved. The bailiff of Cowick collected a yearly income of £74 in 1463, and by the 1470s this had increased to about £80. Annual expenses on the other hand were in the region of £50 to £70.⁽⁶⁵⁾

The only years when the bailiff failed to report a surplus of income over expenditure were those when the abbot and his household visited Exeter for an extended period. In 1481 Abbot Dynyngton came in May for the assizes, and the cost of his stay amounted to almost £16; in the following year he came again and over £40 was spent on food and drink "for the lord of Tavistock's hospitality". These expenses

were charged to the account of the bailiff of Cowick manor and resulted in his having to record a substantial deficit each year.⁽⁶⁵⁾

The abbot of Tavistock would not have seen his primary role as that of a pastor and spiritual adviser to his monks; rather he was a dignitary of some importance in both county and church affairs. Like most abbots of the time he maintained a substantial retinue of servants and other attendants; from 1514 he even aspired to a seat in the House of Lords. However for any monk of Cowick there was always the possibility that he might one day be elected abbot; and when Abbot Dynyngton died in 1490, a monk named Richard Yeme, who had served at Cowick priory for over ten years and held the post of receiver in 1489, was chosen in his place. Abbot Yeme did not long enjoy his promotion, for he too died in the early months of 1492, after barely a year in office.⁽⁶⁶⁾

By 1505 the title of prior had been re-introduced to denote the senior of the monks at Cowick. However in the 16th century the priors were not instituted by the bishop, as in the old days under Bec, but were merely sent to Cowick by the abbot of Tavistock, and were removable at his discretion. They now ranked third or fourth in seniority among the monks of Tavistock abbey. In the 14th century the priors had appointed their own stewards and advocates; now the steward, receiver and other officers of Cowick were appointed not by the prior but by the abbot.⁽⁶⁷⁾

The accounts kept by Richard Yeme when he was receiver in 1489 give us a good idea of the variety of expenditure which the priory could incur. The sum of 16 pence was spent during the year on washing the ornaments in the church, and 8 pence on repair of the clock there. A further 8 pence paid for drawing nets through the priory fishpond to catch tench for the abbot of Tavistock, and no less than 3 shillings and 2 pence were spent on catching eels and salmon. The purchase of pears "called le Wardons" accounted for a further 2 shillings and 8 pence. A hat for the abbot was bought at a cost of 2 shillings and 4 pence. The sum of 4 pence was spent on the purchase of six girdles for the albs of the church, and 6 pence on the repair of a table before the high altar, "together with repair of the door there and purchase of a key for it".⁽⁶⁸⁾

From the re-establishment of the monastic life at Cowick in 1463 each of the monks was paid a weekly allowance of about 5 shillings to meet his personal expenses. This was a substantial amount of money in an age when most men could not hope to earn more than 5 or 6 pence in a day; so far had the monastic ideal of personal poverty been forgotten. Indeed in the 1520s and 1530s the priors of Cowick used their own money to take tenancies of land near the priory. In 1527 Prior Andrew Thomas paid 26 shillings and 8 pence to rent a field called Culver Park which adjoined the cemetery chapel of St Michael; and his example was followed by his successor John Coter, prior from 1528 to 1539.⁽⁶⁹⁾

However other entries in the priory accounts, for the purchase of bread and wine and for ringing the bells, show that divine service at Cowick was not neglected. Mass in the priory church would usually have been celebrated by one of the monks who was in holy orders, but in 1477 or 1478 a priest had to be paid 4 pence a day for two weeks to say mass at Cowick while the monk Ralph Pensonn was ill.⁽⁷⁰⁾

From about 1470 until the 1530s the monks of Cowick also made regular journeys on horseback into the hills beyond Whitestone, to hold services in the remote chapel at Oldridge which had no priest of its own.⁽⁷⁰⁾

(60) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/D82/32.

(61) H. P. R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey* (Cambridge, 1951), p.28; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/D82/21-2; W1258M/G4/53/2, 22 Edw.IV-1 Ric.III.

(62) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 2-3 Edw.IV.

(63) *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1467-77*, p.62; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1476-85*, p.90.

(64) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53 passim.

(65) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1; W1258M/G4/53/4.

(66) *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 22 (1944), p.197; Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/2, 4-5 Hen.VII.

(67) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/3; W1258M/G4/38; *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 5 (1940), p.37.

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

(69) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 18-19, 21-2, 25-6 Hen.VIII.

(70) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/53/1, 9-10 Edw.IV; W1258M/G4/53/4, 17-18 Edw.IV.