

FUND-RAISING FOR A MEDIEVAL MONASTERY: INDULGENCES AND GREAT BRICETT PRIORY¹

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ALTHOUGH THEY TEND to evoke derision and dismissal because of their association with Chaucer's Pardoner and Luther's onslaught on catholicism, indulgences were, arguably, one of the fundamental and most ubiquitous elements of pre-Reformation religion. They were certainly much utilised as a means of fund-raising, and that very exploitation attests their popularity. Yet the mechanisms for such fund-raising are often obscure, dependent on scattered evidence and chance survivals. One cache of material which throws some light on the collecting process now survives among the archives of King's College, Cambridge, concerning the priory of Great Bricett in Suffolk.

The priory was founded in the second decade of the 12th century by Ralph son of Brien. Its early history is ambiguous: although linked to the French monastery of St Léonard-de-Noblat (now in Haute Vienne), it was only at the end of the 13th century that it was recognised as fully dependent on that house, thereby definitively entering the ranks of that fairly large group of small monasteries which, because of those foreign connections, are collectively known as the alien priories.² The eventual fate of most of those houses, during the course of the Anglo-French wars of the 14th and 15th centuries, was to be confiscation by the Crown, with their properties – and their records – in many cases passing to other bodies. Great Bricett, like several other such establishments, was used by Henry VI to provide some of the endowment for his collegiate foundation of St Mary, St Nicholas, and St Bernard at Cambridge – the foundation generally known as King's College.³

Numerous records from Great Bricett priory now repose among the King's College archives. Among them, all grouped under a single reference number (GBR/278), are 163 separate copies of a single document, a schedule of the spiritual privileges offered to those who gave donations to support the fabric of the house.⁴ These represent one stage in a common fund-raising process, detailed surviving evidence of which is by no means frequently encountered. While publicity schedules survive in some numbers across the country, and across the centuries through to the advent of printing, what is significant here is the survival of a single schedule in such quantity, and the evidence which the accumulation provides of the response to the collecting drive.

That response will merit attention shortly. For the moment, the publicity schedule itself requires comment. The key element here is the offer of an indulgence, or accumulation of episcopal indulgences, in return for donations, amounting to a remission of 380 days of enjoined penance (see Appendix). Individual bishops could make grants amounting to no more than forty days, so this total must represent at least ten separate episcopal indulgences; as the number of days of remission in each grant might well have been under forty, the number of bishops associated with the enterprise could rise accordingly. It is possible that these represent grants made over a long period: although canonically indulgences were not cumulative, in theory lapsing with a bishop's death, and being applicable only to his own subjects, a process of ratification seems to have allowed their extension both over time, and to other people.⁵

In addition to the quantified indulgence, the documents allege that 'sanctissimus Thomas', an archbishop of Canterbury – presumably Becket (1162–70) – had arranged that donors would be automatically entered into confraternity with Christ Church, Canterbury. This (regardless of its veracity) would have considerably boosted the attraction of Bricett's spiritual privileges, for association with so large and prestigious a prayer

machine would greatly enhance the suffrages from which donors would benefit. Such offers of confraternity are also known from other publicity documents, like that for Sudbury priory issued by Westminster abbey, which had the attraction of confraternity with the whole Cistercian order (Mortimer 1996, no. 124; see also nos. 127–28). The detailed benefits of the Christ Church confraternity are not specified, but given the nature of the enterprise it would be unlikely to be a specific and personalised declaration of participation in the monastery's prayers. Rather, it is likely to have been simply a blanket inclusion among the beneficiaries when commemorated *en masse*, perhaps not even requiring that the names of donors be recorded. Even so, for those seeking prayers for their souls after death and prospective relief from the pains of Purgatory (and during their lives also the benefit of prayers for their general well being), the rewards would have been considered well worth having.⁶

The Great Bricett schedules are written on small slips of parchment, very closely cropped. This is not testimony to the skill of the scribes in ensuring that their writing fitted within the limits of the parchment as it now exists. Rather, the slips mark the end product of a process of mechanical reproduction. The schedules would originally have been written with several copies on a single skin, and only afterwards would they be separated for distribution. This earlier, unseparated, stage is reflected in similar publicity documents among the archives of Hereford cathedral, produced to encourage donations to the new shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe around 1320.⁷

The Great Bricett fund-raising campaign seems to have been an extensive operation. More than one scribe was involved in producing the schedules; all, however, reproduced the same text (making due allowance for minor scribal variations and mistakes). What makes the surviving schedules particularly interesting, is the fact that their survival represents not (as at Hereford) the early stages of a process, but rather its termination. Endorsements on some of the individual schedules show that the batch as now constituted must have been put together when the collecting process was over (or, perhaps, whilst it was still in progress); that the publicity documents had in fact been recalled once they had fulfilled their purpose. Why they were actually retained is not clear; but their survival provides what appears to be the only extant evidence indicating that those responsible for collections did recall the schedules at the end of a campaign – presumably in the hope of preventing further fraudulent collecting.

The precise details and mechanics of Bricett's collecting process must be left largely to the imagination; even its date is impossible to determine. The failure to mention any connection with the French mother house may put things before the formal re-assertion of dependence in 1295; the handwriting is of indeterminate date, and might range from the late 13th to early 14th centuries. The only other clue to date is provided by the reference to crockards (the actual words used being variations of 'cokedo') in some of the endorsements. This suggests a date in the reign of Edward I, probably prior to the demonetisation of those foreign coins in 1300.⁸

The collecting arrangements presumably matched those which can be reconstructed for other such collections. The collectors (or proctors, perhaps pardoners) would have needed episcopal licence to solicit alms: whether they were professional collectors, or 'one-off' appointees (possibly even members of the house) is unknown. Numerous other religious institutions were engaged in similar activities, and their licences are often recorded in surviving episcopal registers, generally being granted for a year at a time. The entry recording this episcopal licence is usually the only surviving notice of such campaigns. A substantial number of licences appear in the late-13th- and early-14th-century registers from the diocese of Lincoln.⁹ As the early Norwich registers are for the most part unprinted, it is not clear whether they contain similar documents; but the printed descriptions suggest that this is unlikely (Smith 1981, 150).

Despite such lacunae, the endorsements on some of the schedules do offer important evidence of the collecting processes for indulgences of this type. Statements of receipts, and of the itineraries of the collectors, are as a rule virtually unknown; however, several of the Bricett schedules bear jottings which offer some indications of this activity, and which may in fact be unique. Unfortunately, they do not provide all the information that might be wanted. Only a few schedules carry endorsements, and those are sometimes restricted to only a word or two. Seventeen give lists of places with a note of receipts; a few others have notes of a different type. The crabbed handwriting, the physical state of the documents, and the lack of ultra-violet light by which to consult them, mean that not all of the endorsements are currently easily legible or recoverable. Even so, enough remains to allow comment.¹⁰

While there are seventeen lists of places, in almost every case relating to a rural deanery, the area covered is limited. The identified territory is confined to East Anglia, with all the identified places falling in fact in Suffolk. This is somewhat surprising. Given the large number of slips which survive, the likelihood that all the endorsed placenames would randomly fall within the southern half of the diocese of Norwich must be considered. It is not unknown for collecting licences to be restricted to a single archdeaconry, or a couple of archdeaconries;¹¹ yet despite Great Bricett's location in the heart of Suffolk, it might be expected that the collections would also extend into Norfolk. Certainly the surviving number of slips, if the collections were confined to Suffolk, is surprisingly large: many of them must in that case have been superfluous, unless the campaign was conceived as lasting for some time. (The possibility that there were further schedules which no longer survive only adds to the uncertainty here). The endorsed jottings are usually lists of placenames from single rural deaneries, although precisely which is rarely specified (in some cases, however, the endorsement consists solely of the deanery name). The listings themselves leave the status of the endorsements unclear; for in no case do the placenames provide a complete statement of all the deanery's parishes. As incomplete lists they may be more *aides-memoires* than formal statements for an account, possibly mere notes preliminary to a more bureaucratically acceptable record. If there was a formal final account, it may have been structured along the lines of the surviving list of contributions from Norfolk parishes towards the construction of the shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe at Hereford.¹²

The deaneries identifiable from the endorsements are those of Blackbourn, Thingoe, Hartismere, Loes, Thedwastre, Clare, Orford, Lothingland, Fordham, Stow, Sudbury, Hoxne, and Carlford. In a few cases – Blackbourn, Hartismere, Thedwastre, and Sudbury – there are two separate lists. Fordham is also named in another single-word endorsement, but whether this refers to the whole deanery or simply the parish is impossible to tell. The duplication of deaneries reveals that overall this was no one-off campaign, but one which entailed repeated circuits of the areas. Just how many circuits, and by whom, cannot be determined. It would not be impossible for the priory to have used the services of professional questors – the sort of people who, when portrayed in the character of Chaucer's Pardoner, were to give the indulgence trade a bad name. The activities of some such people in the early 14th century were not much better, with numerous injunctions against their hard-sell practices.¹³ On the other hand (and perhaps the more likely option given the nature of the collection and the fact of the statements of receipts) the collecting might have been done by members of the house, or its servants, perhaps broadly along the lines of the collections made in later centuries by representatives of the Ludlow Palmers' guild, or the way in which Robert de Boxstede acted as the national collector for the hospital of St Mary of Mount Syon, Jerusalem, in the later 14th century.¹⁴

The occasional duplication of deaneries in the endorsements is not matched by a complete duplication of placenames. In fact, here is remarkably little overlap.

Nevertheless, the repetition in itself is significant, even if it is impossible to reconstruct a chronology, or to place the lists in any sort of order. The repeated visitations were not necessarily worthwhile: the two visits to the deanery of Blackbourn are represented by lists giving twelve and fifteen names, but only five places appear twice. The proceeds at Hopton amounted to 4d. on one turn, and 1d. on the other (which was first or second cannot be said). Likewise, Walsham-le-Willows produced sums of $\frac{1}{2}$ d. and $2\frac{1}{2}$ d.; while Elmswell gave 1d. and $1\frac{1}{4}$ d. The overlap for the deanery of Sudbury (with lists of seventeen and twenty-six places) is equally problematic. Cockfield produced sums of 5d. and 1d., Lindsey $\frac{1}{2}$ d. on both occasions; but what is striking is that on one list several places (Wattisham, Brettenham, Whatfield and Kersey) produce nothing, although sums are noted against them on the other list.

The placenames have their oddities. What is striking is the almost complete omission of the major settlements of the county. That Ipswich, as a separate deanery, is not represented may be simply a matter of chance: its collector did not make any notes on his schedule. The omission of Bury St Edmunds might be similarly accidental; but as an area exempt from the authority of the Bishop of Norwich it offers the possibility for further complexity. It is unlikely that an episcopal collecting licence would be considered valid within the exempt jurisdiction; but whether the abbots issued their own licences is unknown. However, the absence of major places is not complete. Orford donates 4s. 5d. – the highest amount received from any of the named places. Great Ashfield also gave 3s. $\frac{3}{4}$ d., and Tunstall 18d., but nowhere else is recorded as giving over 1s. Indeed, the great majority of donations were less than 3d., with many of only $\frac{1}{2}$ d.

The total amount recorded as being given comes to under 40s., which is remarkably little for so much effort. Of course, this is an incomplete total, and in fact no guide at all to the eventual outcome. Exactly what the recorded sums reflect is unclear: it may be that they are notes of receipts after deducting costs (including travel and accommodation for the collector); allowance for such deductions would increase the generosity somewhat.

One notable feature of some of the lists is the reference to 'cokedos' among the receipts for the deaneries of Loes, Orford, Hoxne, and Carlford, the value of which would have to be added to the total of the sterling amounts. This provides some chronological limitation, for it ties the documents to the period when continental coins were circulating in Edward I's England, more usually known as crockards and pollards. The output of mints in the Low Countries, these coins deliberately mimicked the English coinage, although without actually copying it. While often of good standard as coins, their circulation was problematic, and was effectively terminated by a formal demonetization in 1300.¹⁵ The references in these Great Bricett documents (not always fully intelligible) suggest that there was a considerable amount of such foreign currency circulating in East Anglia at this time: at some places (for example, Wantisden, Iken, and Chillesford, in the deanery of Orford) the receipts noted were solely in such coin. Perhaps inclusion in the lists also attests to the wiliness of East Anglians in using the collection to divest themselves of such dubious coins (much as collecting boxes still accumulate the unwanted leftovers of foreign trips).¹⁶

Not all of the endorsements are of parishes and receipts. One seems to note the deadline for delivery of the collection; one gets close to being a list of donors from Great and Little Bradley. Two cases suggest that offerings were made in lieu of penance, possibly at the instigation of a parish priest, or as the outcome of court proceedings. One thus mentions working on feast days; the other seems to refer to contumacy.

The sums recorded in the endorsements are too small, and too haphazardly noted, to justify any attempt at a total, an attempt further invalidated by the impossibility of assessing the worth of the recorded crockards. In any event, given the many schedules which lack notes of receipts, a total calculated from the endorsements which do provide information would be worthless. Nevertheless, it seems a reasonable proposition that the Great Bricett

collection was productive overall. As with other collections – the Hereford collection for Cantilupe’s shrine is again the most striking instance – the accumulation of small sums could still produce a reasonable total, one which in this case presumably made a notable contribution towards meeting the house’s needs.¹⁷

At first glance, the publicity statements for the Great Bricett indulgences are unappealing documents, their 164 copies being merely duplicates of little intrinsic value beyond the statement of spiritual privileges. Yet as a bundle they provide valuable evidence of the mechanics of such localised collecting in the late 13th century, illustrating a point in the process which seems otherwise to leave no trace. The endorsements on individual copies also add to knowledge and understanding of such collections, and help to illuminate processes which were part of the economics of salvation. Being essentially ephemera, their survival over the centuries is accidental, and fortuitous; but having survived, they now prove their worth.

APPENDIX

Cambridge, King’s College Archives, GBR/278: The schedule of spiritual privileges offered to donors to support Great Bricett priory. This text is a conflation from an examination of a sample of the individual slips to produce an appropriate version. The separate documents contain a range of minor scribal variants and errors, and assorted omissions, but none of those are here indicated.

Text

Hec sunt beneficia a venerabilibus patribus archiepiscopis ecclesie Cantuariensis seu eorum vices gerentibus, necnon a reverendis episcopis ecclesie Norwicensis, fabrice ecclesie sancti Leonardi de Bresete ac eidem loco et canonicis regularibus ordinis sancti Augustini deo devote inibi famulantibus, misericorditer et caritative concessa omnibus vere penitentibus et confessis qui fabrice ecclesie sancti Leonardi predictae et canonicis eidem pia de bonis sibi a deo collatis contulerint subsidia caritatis. CCCiiii^{xx} dies de iniuncta sibi penitentia misericorditer relaxantur. Preterea sanctissimus Thomas archiepiscopus, litteris suis patentibus, omnes eos qui de elemosinis suis loco sancti Leonardi contulerint seu transmiserint omniumque oracionum ac beneficiorum ecclesie Cantuarie perpetue constituit esse participes. In qua ecclesia sancti Leonardi predicta divina ministrante clemencia in honore summi patris misericordie et beatissime genitricis sue Marie, et meritis sanctissimi confessoris sui Leonardi, omniumque sanctorum dei, varia fiunt miracula que inibi intueri poterunt fide oculata. Ad hec prior et canonici ecclesie sancti Leonardi predicti omnibus benefactoribus suis et bona sibi procurantibus quoquomodo concedunt fieri participes omnium bonorum spiritualium que fiunt in ecclesia predicta vel fient in perpetuum. Summa dierum venie: CCCiiii^{xx} dies.

Translation

These are the benefits mercifully and charitably granted by the venerable fathers the archbishops of the church of Canterbury or their vicegerents, as well as by the reverend bishops of the church of Norwich, to the fabric of the church of Saint Leonard of Bricett and to that place and the canons regular of the order of Saint Augustine who devoutly serve God therein, to all those who are truly penitent and contrite who piously offer in charitable subsidy of the goods granted to them by God to the fabric of the aforesaid church of Saint Leonard and its canons. 380 days of their enjoined penance are mercifully relaxed. Besides that, the most holy Archbishop Thomas, by his letters patent, established that all who grant or transmit their alms to that place of Saint Leonard should be perpetual sharers in all of the prayers and benefits of the church of Canterbury. In which aforesaid

church of Saint Leonard by the ministration of divine clemency, in honour of the most high father of mercy and of his most blessed mother Mary, and by the merits of his most holy confessor Leonard, and of all the saints of God, various miracles are performed there as eye witnesses have observed. For this the prior and canons of the aforesaid church of Saint Leonard have granted to all their benefactors and those procuring goods for them in whatsoever way that they should be perpetual sharers in all the spiritual goods which are or will be performed in the aforesaid church. Total of the days of pardon: 380 days.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for funding the archival research from which this article derives. I also wish to thank the Archivist of King's College, Cambridge, for her assistance.
- 2 For the house itself, see *V.C.H. Suffolk*, II, 94–95; see also Harper-Bill 1990, nos 20, 45, 145–46. On the alien priories in general, see Matthew 1962.
- 3 *V.C.H. Cambridgeshire*, III, 379–81; *V.C.H. Suffolk*, II, 95.
- 4 A transcription and translation are provided in the appendix. A further single copy of the schedule is at GBR/176.
- 5 See discussion in Zutshi 1997, 282–83; and Haines 1989, 196 and refs. For a publicity schedule from Liskeard which identifies the individual bishops making grants, see Haines 1989, 197–99.
- 6 On monastic confraternity, see Postles 1998, 30–40. See also Clark-Maxwell 1924–25, 19–37; Clark-Maxwell 1929, 180–85; Bishop 1918, 349–61. The appearance of names on one endorsement to a schedule may hint at a record of donors and a formal listing of the beneficiaries.
- 7 Hereford Cathedral Archives, 1447, 3214.
- 8 For further discussion of the reference to crockards, see p. 4 below.
- 9 For characteristic instances, see Hill 1948–86, 3, p. 15, 4, pp. 36, 56–57, 88, 5, pp. 185–86, 6, p. 75. Other examples are scattered through the memoranda sections of the unprinted early-14th-century registers: Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives Office, Ep.Reg. III (Dalderby), V (Burghersh), VII (Bek).
- 10 As the slips are not individually numbered, it is impossible to give precise references for the instances to be cited in the next few paragraphs.
- 11 This appears in several of the Lincoln indulgences, for instance the licences issued in 1305 for the hospital of St John at Burford, addressed solely to the archdeaonries of Oxford and Buckingham, or that for the nuns of St John at Rothwell, addressed to the archdeaconry of Northampton: Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives Office, Ep.Reg. III, ff. 88r–v.
- 12 Hereford Cathedral Archives, 1446.
- 13 Attempts to limit such practices appear in some of the licences included in the Lincoln registers. See, e.g., Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives Office, Ep.Reg. III, ff. 179v, 403r. See also Hill 1999, 35–36.
- 14 For the Ludlow arrangements see *V.C.H. Shropshire*, II, 134–40, although the collecting arrangements for Bricett are unlikely to have been so formalised and structured. For St Mary, see Cambridge University Library, EDR.D/2/1, ff. r–v; York, Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, Reg. 12, f. 15r.
- 15 For the problem of crockards and pollards, see discussions in Mate 1972, 56–60, 63–67, 69–72; Mayhew and Walker 1977, 125–46; Prestwich 1969, 411–13. For 'cokedo' see Latham and Howlett 1975–97, 376.
- 16 This was a persistent problem, nationwide. As late as 1536–7, the account of the undertreasurer of St Mary's, Warwick, claimed allowance of 2s. 'For los of evyll silver takyn of ye ii confessoures at Estur and for ill silver takyn owt of ye box stondyng upon the highe awter this yere': London, Public Record Office, E315/492, f. 27r.
- 17 It is also likely that there were other donations in kind, which are not noted in the endorsements. Items of jewelry and miscellaneous other merchandise might also have been given, and presumably sold if not conveyed to the house.

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