

JOCELIN OF BRAKELOND'S IDENTITY: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

by NORMAN SCARFE

IN 1954, IN his invaluable edition of *The Kalendar of Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds*, the late R.H.C. Davis included a complete collection of the charters of Abbot Samson, or his officials (obedientaries), together with feet of fines made in his court and to which he or his obedientaries were party. (Fines made in the King's court were not included, as they were being published by the Pipe Roll Society: Davis 1954, xlvi–xlvi.) In his introduction to these documents Ralph Davis drew attention to a strange discrepancy. On 18 May 1198, a chirograph (hand-written) charter witnessed a grant of lands by the abbot and convent in a full meeting of the chapter, and in this charter the cellarer was named *Joscelinus*, a Latin form of Jocelin: furthermore, *Joscelinus celerarius* witnessed two other charters during 1198 (as well as others less precisely dated: Davis 1954, lii–liii). Now the well-known Chronicle written at Bury by Jocelin of Brakelond, *Cronica Jocelini de Brakelonda*, described the very vivid events of that year 1198 in Bury abbey, in which the cellarer made notable appearances, but not once as 'Jocelin': in the Chronicle, Jocelin of Brakelond regularly at that time referred to him as Jocellus. Yet he was of course completely familiar with the names of all his contemporaries in the abbey.

The cellarer was the second most important obedientary after the prior: Jocelin described him as '*pater secundus in monasterio*', second only to the prior.¹ Ralph Davis naturally concluded that the cellarer in 1198 was, as he bore witness on those charters, a monk called Jocelin. With reason, he concluded that the chronicler, writing in that year about the events of the year, and knowing perfectly well the name of the abbey's *pater secundus*, must have had some motive for referring to him as 'Jocellus'. Davis saw that the likely explanation was that the chronicler was himself the cellarer that year, and that 'he would have considered it indecent to write in the first-person-singular of his own significant acts: the first duty of a monk was humility' and, one must add, obedience, which, as he fully demonstrated, was not an attribute easy to combine with being cellarer under the régime of Abbot Samson.

When I first read Professor Davis's impressive edition of the Kalendar in 1954, I readily accepted this explanation. Without becoming intimately familiar with the Chronicle, you could recall that the affairs of the abbey's finances, and specifically those of the cellary, began to appear almost at the outset – indeed they come in the second column of the very first folio of Jocelin's book. In the last third of the book, they occupy a prominent, sometimes even a predominant, position in his record of the abbey's life, so that you can scarcely help sensing the chronicler's personal involvement in the cares of that office. 'Jocellus' seemed to me to supply the chronicler with a curiously transparent pseudonym: combining *Jocelin* with *celerarius* and calling yourself 'Jocellus' was unlikely to deceive his contemporaries; but then one supposed that very few of them would see the Chronicle, which he presumably intended for the eyes of no more than two or three intimate friends, and principally for the benefit of future obedientaries at Bury, most especially future cellarers, who would learn from it the need to guard their office against the encroachments of overmighty abbots. Of course there is much more to the Chronicle than a sort of early form of 'Whig' history, but I thought it worthwhile to attempt a paraphrase of the main outlines of Jocelin's record, written so as to test the assumption that the writer was – at one stage in his own chronicle – that very responsible official, the abbey's cellarer.

With Professor Davis's encouragement, I wrote the essay. It appeared in 1986 with some studies my publisher entitled *Suffolk in the Middle Ages* (Scarfe 1986, 99–109). I was amused, as Davis was, to find that it had never occurred to him that Jocelin's nom-de-plume was a simple, reliably decipherable (after 800 years!) compound of the words *Jocelin* and *cellarer*. Davis had thought of it

merely as a sort of diminutive of Jocelin, adopted perhaps to conceal from future readers that the author and the cellarer whose story he was telling with such feeling were identical. We can look more closely at the chronicler's motives later on in this brief study. In writing the 1986 essay, I had been glad to find that Dr R.M. Thomson had accepted Davis's identification of Jocelin with the Bury cellarership when he presented his own excellent edition of *The Chronicle of the Election of Hugh* (in succession to Samson, as abbot of Bury), (1974, xvii).

My only disagreement with Rodney Thomson was over his acceptance of the tradition going back, I suppose, to Thomas Carlyle's infuriating best-seller *Past and Present* (1843), that Jocelin's *Chronicle* was a 'biography of Abbot Samson, worked up during the period 1182–1203' with a few additions (Thomson 1974, xiii, xxii). Rodney Thomson at once wrote to me, warmly concurring that he had wrongly emphasised the purely biographical intention of Jocelin, and agreeing with my view, itself largely derived from Ralph Davis, that Jocelin's motive in writing was largely a mixture of personal and constitutional, to set straight the recent rights and wrongs of his own 'department', the cellary. (The cellarer's job at Bury was not just keeping the cellars – the provision-stores – well-stocked and funded: his was the function of lord of the considerable manor of Bury, with the management of the demesne farm and lands. This explains his position as *pater secundus* of the monastery.)

When I wrote my deliberately selective paraphrase of the *Chronicle*, in *Suffolk in the Middle Ages*, it was singled out by reviewers rather dismissively as 'derivative', and so of course it is. It derives entirely from Jocelin's *Chronicle*, with massive hints and suggestions from the scholarly editors of *The Kalendar of Abbot Samson* and *The Chronicle of the Election of Hugh*. (Has anyone ever written anything of any interest that is not derivative? We acknowledge our 'sources' in the best academic way.)

In 1986 I had culpably failed to read Dr Antonia Gransden's illuminating edition of *The Customary of the Benedictine Abbey of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk* (1973). Gransden is the doyenne of present-day historians of St Edmund's Abbey, and it is characteristically kind of her to have presented me with a rare copy of this fundamental document on the abbey's life. However, it is Dr Gransden's dissension from Ralph Davis's identification of the Chronicler Jocelin with the cellarer, which she originally stated in a rather casual footnote on p. xxii of her introduction to the Customary, that has led to my re-opening of this question. Differences of scholarly opinion, like guest-room beds, are acceptable only after they have been well-aired.

In her footnote, Dr Gransden's dismissal of Davis's chronicler/cellarer identification is based on only two objections. The first is 'that Jocellus the cellarer was present at the elevation of St Edmund in 1198 (Butler 1949, 114) while Jocelin of Brakelond seems to have got his information from a monk John of Diss who was sitting up in the rafters' (Butler 1949, 115). In answer to this first of Antonia Gransden's two objections, I can only begin by saying that after careful reading and re-reading of the passage, nothing at all in it seems to me to show that Jocelin got his information about Samson's famous checking of the condition of the mummified body of his patron either from John of Diss or from any of the servers posted with him high up in the roof. Indeed, much of the detail in Jocelin's account of, for instance, the actual wording of the message Samson deposited on the coffin in a small silk-covered box, could hardly have been seen, let alone read, by a monk perched high in the vault of the roof. But Jocellus the cellarer would have seen it.

Let me consider carefully the whole exciting episode. It begins on p. 106 with the sensational statement that 'in the year of grace 1198 the glorious martyr Edmund wanted to frighten our convent into watching his body more reverently and carefully', for, through their negligence, they nearly incinerated his shrine; and it concludes on pp. 115–16 with the abbot making his personal check of the sacred corpse's condition,² and his supervision of better fire-proofing for the shrine.

In these eleven (printed) pages of his *Chronicle*, Jocelin covered in the liveliest, most vivid, detail the events centred on the Feast of St Edmund, 20 November, and affecting the condition of the glittering shrine and the saint himself, who supplied the main mystic motive, and economic funding, not least *via* the cellary, of their abbey's existence. To me this whole episode reads like the work of someone passionately interested *and involved* in it all. Towards the end, on p. 115, what he says of

John of Diss relates only to the events of Thursday 25 November, and this is all he says: '*ut esset copia testium*' ('in order that there should be plenty of eye-witness'), John of Diss, one of our brothers, sitting up in the roof with the vestry-servers, saw all this plainly. What Jocelin seems to me to be saying about John of Diss and the servers is that they were intended to provide some independent observation of the proceedings, so as to be able to confirm the action that several of the brethren took part in. Had Jocelin not taken part, as I believe he did, then some of these other brethren are more likely than John of Diss, or the servers, to have been his informants. But there really is not a word to suggest that Diss was his informant.

In any case, it is not suggested that Diss had any actual involvement in the intimate repairs and re-arrangements of the shrine in these days devoted to Edmund's Feast. Let us see how involved Jocelin the chronicler was, using the first person singular; for this has, for me, a bearing on, and significant comparison with, the behaviour of 'Jocellus' the cellarer. For me, it is precisely because Jocellus took part in these proceedings that I continue to believe so firmly that he was Jocelin of Brakelond.

Let me summarise these events around the shrine and the high altar as briefly as I can. The Feast of Edmund was celebrated on Saturday 20 November. On the Sunday a three-day fast was proclaimed, the effects of which can only be guessed at. On the Tuesday, the feretory was removed to the high altar to allow the building of a higher marble plinth for the shrine. The sacred body lay still in its coffin in the usual place, but with its gleaming, jewelled feretory casing removed (p. 112). The coffin itself was now lifted and carried as far as the altar, and put back inside the feretory. Jocelin does not hide the fact that he ('I') ignored instructions not to approach *nisi vocatus*, and so had 'a sinful hand' ('sinful' especially because 'disobedient') in that removal (p. 113). You can hear him breathing heavily with the involvement.

On the Thursday, while the convent sang compline, Samson had a word with the sacrist and the physician, and said he thought the three of them should inspect their patron that night. They called on the assistance of twelve others with the strength or skill to lift, dismantle and re-fit the feretory. Later, after Samson and the sacrist and physician had made their careful inspection of the body (p. 114), it was thought advisable that others of the brethren should be called to see these miraculous sights. Six were called, and saw these things: '*and six others intruded without the abbot's assent, and they saw the holy body*'. The gate-crashers included Jocellus the cellarer.³ This seems not only to explain how indelibly Jocelin (for I think he must be Jocellus) could describe in so much detail what he saw (I have omitted a whole paragraph of it): it also tallies precisely, in mood and character, with Jocelin the chronicler's frankness about pushing himself forward two days earlier, in sinful disobedience, to lift the sacred coffin as far as the high altar. In 1994, Dr Gransden abandoned the idea that Jocelin must have got his details from what John of Diss saw from the rafters, but now suggested that he concocted them from Samson's official account in Chapter the following morning and from other witnesses. I go on hoping to persuade her that the passionate quality of Jocelin's description is explicable only in terms of his being identified with the gate-crasher Jocellus.

These events of November 1198 Jocelin the Chronicler was describing when, in the same year, the abbey's cellarer was signing himself Jocelin. So what caused him to call the cellarer Jocellus when he mentioned him in the Chronicle?

To get the position completely clear, we need to know that, if we cannot allow Jocelin of Brake-lond to be also the cellarer, then there must have been three contemporaries called Jocelin in Bury abbey: that would argue a very strange new fashion in first names. Rodney Thomson's carefully garnered *rotulus* of some 300 named obedientiaries at Bury between 1044 and 1539 (Thomson 1982) contains only two Jocelins – the two examined here: Jocelin of Brakelond and Dominus Jocelin the almoner.

Looking again at the Bury charters he had been editing, Ralph Davis noted that Charter 26, datable to c. 1206–1209, was witnessed by two Jocelins: '*Gocelino celerario*', with whom we are becoming familiar, and '*Gocelino elemosinario*', Jocelin the almoner. If we do not like the idea of Jocelin of Brakelond doubling with the cellarer, is there anything to be said for identifying, as some historians

have attempted, Jocelin of Brakelond with Jocelin the almoner? We have only to turn to pp. 68–71. There, Jocelin proudly repeats a story ‘well told by another’ – written down, in fact, by the ‘lord (*dominus*) Jocelin our almoner’ at Abbot Samson’s instruction, during a visit to Reading abbey, where it was told by Henry II’s former standard-bearer, the disagreeable Henry of Essex. It concerned a miraculous vision of St Edmund, getting his own back, as usual, on a magnate who had ‘presumed to vex Bury abbey’. As told by the reformed magnate, it is a masterpiece of compressed narrative. But there can be no possibility of confusion between ‘*Dominus Jocelin*’, the almoner, and Jocelin of Brakelond.

Rodney Thomson’s edition of the *Electio Hugonis* supplies (p. 9) some more very clear information. Early in August 1213, the brethren in Bury chapter-house brought in the host and relics and began the process of electing their new abbot, first choosing three uncontroversial, well-respected brothers whose role was to go outside and quietly choose the seven electors. The three included Jocelin the almoner: the seven electors included *Jocelinum de Altari quondam celerarium*: not of course ‘Jocellus the cellarer’ who existed only in the writing, the story, of Jocelin of Brakelond. Jocelin of Brakelond had entered the abbey as a novice in 1173. He started out with Samson as admirable novice-master. He was chosen as chaplain to Samson when he became abbot; then as cellarer, *pater secundus*. By that time, Samson was encroaching on the cellarer’s customary rights and duties, so that Jocelin was reduced to setting out the conflict between abbot and convent in his chronicle, written over the years c. 1198–1203. I have tried to clarify the struggle between cellarer and abbot over those years c. 1198–1203 when Jocelin of Brakelond was writing (Scarfe 1986, 104–09), and I don’t need to set it out again. One sees why Jocelin of Brakelond would have seemed a natural choice by the brethren as one of the seven to elect a successor to Samson.

The second of Dr Gransden’s objections to accepting the chronicler as cellarer was that ‘there is no proof that the office of sub-cellarer and guestmaster were ever the same’ as Professor Davis suggested. I do not think sub-cellarer and guestmaster were the same. On p. 105 of the essay I have quoted, I show that sub-cellarer was a new job-description, implying that the cellarer (Jocelin) was acting *sub* the abbot. It was that appointment which led to Jocelin’s giving himself away in the chronicle, with a notably embarrassed awkwardness of expression – highly uncharacteristic: *illum qui prius fuit subcelerarius constituit celerarium: he who had been acting sub-cellarer was made cellarer* (Butler 1949, 90).

A few lines later, Master G., Samson’s clerk-overseer of the cellary, became drunk and overbearing. Someone spoke to Samson about him, who quietened him down. I have small doubt that the someone who spoke to Samson was Jocelin. It caused another uncharacteristic convolution with his quill: ‘one of our obedientiaris, whoever he may have been, took steps through a third person to see that the abbot was properly and reasonably informed’. ‘Whoever he may have been’ fools no-one, for the writer must have known precisely which obedientiary it was who was concerned in Master G.’s deplorable behaviour. But surely an obvious explanation for his affecting not to know is that the obedientiary was Jocelin himself. It is sad to reflect that Jocelin was reduced to approaching Samson through a third person. As early as p. 62, Jocelin was recording the English custom that many people give a present to the abbot as their lord on 1 January, and deciding to make him an inventory of all the churches in his gift, and their reasonable value (there were over sixty of them). Already, Jocelin was showing, as he did on his first folio, an interest in finances that would certainly be a qualification for appointment as cellarer. Alas, already on p. 63, when he has described his gift of the inventory, Jocelin adds ‘I was then pleasing in his sight’. Conscientious obedientiaris risked disobedience and emotional struggle when confronted by overbearing abbots, as they would have done in the face of Samson’s predecessor, the hopelessly incompetent Hugh.

Ralph Davis brought his Introduction to *The Kalendar* to a cheerful conclusion. I can only repeat it: ‘It might have been a sign of monastic decadence if an ordinary cloister-monk, or even the almoner, had shown the intense interest in revenues that Jocelin of Brakelond’s Chronicle displays; but for the cellarer to have done so was merely a sign of monastic efficiency’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Rodney Thomson, the editor of the *Electio Hugonis*, for reading the draft of this paper and re-affirming his complete agreement with the late Ralph Davis's conclusion about Jocelin of Brakelond's identity, and with the details of this re-examination. My friend James Campbell, F.B.A., Fellow of Worcester College, has also read this paper and judged its arguments watertight. Professor Gerald Harriss, too, has read and approved it. Professor Antonia Gransden, to my disappointment, writes to me that for her the matter remains inconclusive. How I wish that I could understand her sense that there can be an alternative explanation for Jocelin of Brakelond's reluctance in 1198 to call Jocelin, the cellarer in 1198, Jocelin.

NOTES

- 1 *Cronica*, p. 103. Jocelin chose the title *Cronica* for his work, though he is often represented as having written 'a biography' of Abbot Samson. Had that been his main intention, he would I believe have called his book *Vita Samsonis Abbatis*. I continue to use the sound text of the 1949 edition by H.E. Butler, former Professor of Latin at the University of London. The recent O.U.P. paperback edition inadvertently misleads, since it appears oblivious of R.H.C. Davis's Introduction to the *Kalendar* of Abbot Samson, 1954; also of R.M. Thomson's conclusions about Jocelin of Brakelond in his edition of the *Electio Hugonis*, 1974.
- 2 Full and careful consideration of the available, often dubious and seldom impartial evidence as to the survival and true condition of the corpse of Edmund, 'King, Virgin and Martyr', before and during the centuries after his translation to the shrine in his abbey at Bury is given in Gransden 1985 and 1994, and Scarfe 1970 and 1986.
- 3 Professor Gerald Harriss and other readers of this paper find it as strange as I do that the cellarer (*pater secundus*) was not summoned by Samson to see the miraculous condition of the saint's body, but then neither was the prior himself (Robert had been prior since 1173; Jocelin thought him easy-going: see Thomson 1982, 93). Walter the physician was included in the party of inspection, presumably in case repairs were needed. I think Jocelin includes himself as Jocellus the cellarer (as distinct from Jocelin the chronicler), gate-crashing at the most important event in all this sequence, the viewing of the sacred body, because he too thought that Samson should have invited the cellarer *ex officio*.

REFERENCES

- Butler, H.E. (ed. and trans.), 1949. *Cronica Jocelini de Brakelonda* (with Notes and Appendices). London and Edinburgh.
- Davis, R.H.C. (ed.), 1954. *The Kalendar of Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds and Related Documents*, Royal Historical Soc., Camden 3rd Ser., LXXXIV. London.
- Gransden, A. (ed.), 1973. *The Customary of the Benedictine Abbey of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk*, Henry Bradshaw Soc., xcix, Chichester.
- Gransden, A., 1985. 'The Legends and Traditions Concerning the Origins of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds', *English Hist. Rev.*, CCCXCIV.
- Gransden, A., 1994. 'The Alleged Incorruption of the Body of St Edmund, King and Martyr', *Antiq. J.*, LXXIV.
- Scarfe, N., 1970. 'The Body of St Edmund', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, xxxi (St. Edmund Commemorative Issue, 869–1969).
- Scarfe, N., 1986. *Suffolk in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge. (The relevant chapters are 4: 'St Edmund's Corpse: Defeat into Victory' and 8: 'Chronicles of Bury Abbey'.)
- Thomson, R.M. (ed. and trans.), 1974. *The Chronicle of the Election of Hugh, Abbot of Bury St Edmunds and later Bishop of Ely*, Oxford Medieval Texts. Oxford.
- Thomson, R.M., 1982. 'Obedientaries of St Edmund's Abbey', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, xxxv.