

REFERENCES TO SOUTH ELMHAM MINSTER IN THE MEDIÉVAL ACCOUNT ROLLS OF SOUTH ELMHAM MANOR

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IN THE HIGH and late Middle Ages, it was the practice every Michaelmas for very detailed enquiries to be made into the financial transactions of a manor conducted during the previous twelve months and for the data acquired to be collated, audited and converted into a permanent record, the annual *compotus* or account roll. Forty-five account rolls of the manor of South Elmham from the period 1324 to 1483 have survived (all but four¹ now form part of the Adair Collection² held by the Suffolk Record Office in Ipswich). In them are to be found virtually all the mediéval references to South Elmham Minster.

That the papers of the Adair family contained information about the minster was recognised over a century ago. Writing in these *Proceedings* in 1864,³ Mr B.B. Woodward of Bungay⁴ recorded that the building and the precinct were called by the names of 'Old Minster' and 'Minster Yard' in 'all the court rolls &c.' (*sic*). He was unable to discover 'in any of the old records in the muniment room of Flixton Hall, which I was permitted by Sir Robert Adair to inspect very carefully, the least fragment of information which could either solve or direct my inquiries'.

Mr Woodward's disappointment with the scant reward for his labour still leaps fresh from the page. The evidence is indeed slender. Unfortunately, it was not the function of any manorial officer, the court steward or the scrivener for example, to busy himself with anything not directly connected with manorial administration, unless instructed otherwise by his employer. The place in history or the physical condition of an unprofitable relic was no more necessarily the professional concern of the mediéval accountant than of his modern counterpart. Commiserations for Mr Woodward should perhaps be accompanied by expressions of thanks to that person or persons who, miraculously, caused the Adair records not to be in Flixton Hall on the night of 12th-13th December 1846 when a Canaletto and numerous other works of fine art and furniture ('partly insured in the Norwich Union Fire Office') were destroyed in a catastrophic fire.⁵

In the account rolls, the minster was generally described as 'le Menstre' or 'le Mynstre'⁶ in the Anglo-Norman French and in the Latin,⁷ consistently, as the 'Monasterium'. These terms applied both to the building itself and to the enclosure, 'le Mynstreclos'.⁸ No adjectives were employed. It was not called the 'Old Minster', church or palace. If, as seems almost certain, 'le Chapellane'⁹ referred to the chapel situated in the inner court at South Elmham manor (the term 'bishop's palace' was not used in the account rolls) and not, therefore, to the minster, then none of the ways and lanes leading about the South Elmham estate included the minster as an element in its name. This implies a degree of isolation and might serve as fairly strong evidence that the building was in a state of disuse by the mid-14th century. That the mediéval population of South Elmham thought it was the site of a monastic building there is no doubt.

The enclosure clearly formed part of the demesne or manor farm. As often as it was let to a short-term tenant, it was retained for grazing by the manor's cows or sheep.¹⁰ The minster's agricultural use was as pasture: it was not ploughed. Two other demesne pieces took their names from their proximity to the minster, 'le Mynstrewong',¹¹ a large arable field, and 'le Mynstremedewe'¹² which lay between the minster and The Beck. Downstream (northwards) from this group of fields lay the Old Park and upstream (southwards) the

New Park. For most of the period covered by the account rolls, both parks were carefully maintained and stocked. For some bishops, notably William Bateman (1344–55), it might be suggested that the hunting was South Elmham's main attraction.¹³ Because the cost of repairing the parks was entered on a separate panel on the account rolls from maintenance of the minster close, it is certain that the minster lay outside the emparked areas. Any notion that the bishops and their guests pursued game only within the pales should, however, be speedily rebutted (Flixton Priory manor courts, *passim*).

The grazing of the ditches round the minster was included with the grazing of the enclosure itself. There is no serious doubt that the minster was always ditched on all four sides, but one of the earliest account rolls recorded a short lease of three ditches.¹⁴ The spoil obtained from digging and cleaning out was thrown up and into the enclosure where it was formed into a 'comb' (ridge) and planted with a thorn hedge.¹⁵ There is ample evidence that both the ditches and, possibly, a large part of the enclosure from time to time became overgrown.¹⁶ Invading sloe thickets were a very common feature of the later medieval landscape of Suffolk.

Great caution is required before equating the determined clearance of the thorns with an upsurge in the fortunes of the minster building. Repairs to the hedges were more necessary for keeping in grazing cattle and sheep than protecting the site from strays. Clearance was quickly followed by replanting to produce a low, stock-proof barrier. Another urgent use awaited the underwood removed in that it was required for firing several different types of tiles and bricks in the kilns at South Elmham manor.¹⁷ The clearance of 1454–55¹⁸ coincided with the manufacture of a particularly large batch of tiles.

Exceptionally detailed and expensive work was carried out round the enclosure in 1391–92¹⁹ and 1393–94,²⁰ however. This work included measures to stop the beck overflowing near the minster and the clearing of thirteen acres of new ditches round the minster with renewal where necessary of the hedge on the comb. The labourer principally employed, John Harry, died before his tasks were completed.²¹ All this was undertaken within the five years following the grant in 1387 of a licence to crenellate his manor house at South Elmham being given to Bishop Henry Despenser (1370–1406).²² Had repairs to the minster building itself been effected during this (or any other) period covered by the account rolls, it is certain that the costs involved would have been entered on the appropriate panels of expenditure ('Costs of Buildings' and 'Small Expenses'). It appears that no such evidence survives. The idea that Despenser was arresting the decline of the minster should again be qualified by the information that large-scale building works were in progress at the manor house requiring large numbers of locally-fired tiles.

It is a common assumption that the problems surrounding the medieval archaeology and architecture of the minster are inextricably entwined with the history of the manor house itself. The contents of one particular account roll certainly reinforce this assumption. A complete panel in the expenses section of the roll for 1342–43 was devoted to the costs of the 'Chapel' and 'Cloyster'.²³ The location of the chapel in the inner court has already been noticed. The existence of a cloister with white-washed stone (flint and mortar) walls²⁴ and straw-thatched roof²⁵ is altogether more interesting.

In fact there were two 'cloystres'.²⁶ One of them was described in 1342–43 as the 'Old Cloister'.²⁷ This description inevitably invites the question as to whether reference was being made to a structure within 'le Mynstreclos'. In that same account roll, the entry concerning the grazing at the 'Monasterium' had already been made. There appears to be no good reason why, if the repairs to the 'Old Cloister' in fact referred to a structure at the 'Monasterium', the scrivener should not have said so. Further evidence that both 'cloystres' were within the large complex of buildings at the manor house is suggested by

the account rolls. In one, a cloister was described as 'near the [. . .] Chamber';²⁸ in another a cloister was described as 'towards the chapel';²⁹ it is possible that these references were to the same cloister. However, another roll listed repairs to two cloisters in the same breath as repairs to other houses 'inside the moat'. The balance of the evidence seems to be strongly in favour of both cloisters being at only a very short distance from South Elmham Hall.

The reference to the 'Old cloister'³⁰ is most important. It implies that the other cloister was built at some later date. It therefore appears to be the case that, quite separately from the minster, a cloistered monastic community had existed on the site of South Elmham Hall at a period which the 14th-century scrivener clearly considered to be in the fairly distant past. What remained of this earlier cell was later incorporated into a later phase of ecclesiastical building which included the newer cloister.

The field-name 'Eldhallestede'³¹ attached to a large piece of arable demesne which, by a process of elimination, lay close to South Elmham Hall itself, is a further complication. If its name means what it says, this field lay near or on the site of an earlier, very probably Saxon, version of South Elmham Hall. The published results of field-walking undertaken in the parishes of St Cross and St James by Mr M. Hardy and Mr E.A. Martin³² did not uncover such a site, although their survey was necessarily restricted to land now under the plough. It appears that the historians' search should be for those bishops who, next to the 'Eldhalle', established a convent and then, before the 14th century, converted it into a commodious manorial residence. Because the architectural historians insist that the minster as it now stands may well be 11th-century in date,³³ this building also was obviously part of the same process of development.

Against this background, one particular charter of Norwich Cathedral itself seems especially interesting. It recorded that the first bishop of Norwich, Herbert de Losinga (1091–1119), had given to his new establishment at Norwich 'the property at Elmham in Suffolk which I bought [*sic*] from William de Neveris [Noers]'. Miss Barbara Dodwell has dated this charter to between 5 August 1100 and 3 September 1101, 'possibly before 21 April 1101'. The entry immediately before the Elmham bequest concerned a house in Norwich which bishop Herbert had repaired ('*reparavi*').³⁴ The charter also included the statement which lies at the heart of the controversy of St Edmund's corpse, that Herbert had given the church of Hoxne to the cathedral foundation together with the chapel of St Edmund at Hoxne 'where that same martyr was killed'.³⁵ The whole charter illustrates, so it seems, the single-minded determination of Herbert de Losinga to secure the future of the cathedral out beyond the long shadows cast by the abbey of St Edmunds at Bury. The Hoxne controversy suggests that he was prepared to seek out, appropriate and foster any tradition, any legend, any site which might confirm the ancient origins and sanctity of the East Anglian See.

The rescue by purchase from William de Neveris of a manor which had previously been the property of the Bishop of Thetford (Losinga's predecessor) and which brought with it the site (at least) of Elmham minster, one of the places most sacred to the history of the diocese, therefore appears to fit the ambitions and purpose of Herbert de Losinga very closely. This property also abutted on others (for example, the manor of Homersfield) in the township of South Elmham which had not been allowed to fall into lay hands. By buying it back, Losinga was, also, consolidating the lands and privileges which belonged to the Liberty of South Elmham,³⁶ an area of private jurisdiction which was certainly the property of the bishopric and which extended over the westernmost quarter or 'ferthing' of Wainford Hundred. In passing, it should be noted that by referring to the boundary between Elmham and Bungay as the 'hundryd mere',³⁷ a post-medieval document in the

Adair Collection raises the question as to whether South Elmham had formerly been one of the small Anglo-Danish hundreds,³⁸ or, alternatively, had formed part of Hoxne (alias the Bishop's) Hundred rather than of Wainford.

It may be very significant that the 14th-century account rolls of South Elmham manor use the adjective 'old' (in Latin *vetus*) sparingly when describing buildings and landscape features: the old mill,³⁹ the old park, the old cloister,⁴⁰ 'Oldhallestede'. With the possible exception of the old mill, all these sites can be located with safety close to South Elmham Hall. The list of 'old' features does not include the minster. Recent archaeological excavations within the minster enclosure have led the county archaeologist Dr Stanley West to describe the minster site as 'remarkably clean'. By contrast, recent field-walking in the parish of South Elmham St Margaret by Mr M. Hardy⁴¹ has revealed two sites very near South Elmham Hall with 7th-century pottery. One of these sites, which may well prove to be that of 'Oldhallestede', has yielded a fragment of mid-Saxon window glass. In short, both the medieval documents and the archaeological evidence point to the complex of buildings near South Elmham Hall rather than to the minster as the true site of the 7th-century seat of the bishopric.

Neither the interior of the minster nor a large percentage of the enclosure have been excavated using modern techniques and technology and until this is effected the origins of the building will remain obscure. Until then, the suspicion will undoubtedly grow that it was Herbert de Losinga who, seeking to preserve the tradition that South Elmham had once been a place of great importance to the history of his diocese, rebuilt the minster, but in the wrong place. Whether or not he deliberately re-sited the minster down in the flood-tract of The Beck rather than on dry land near South Elmham Hall again remains to be resolved. It could be argued that if the 'Old Cloister' were Saxon in date, the move was undertaken deliberately and flying in the face of architectural evidence still standing in the early 12th century. A motive for this would not be hard to find: public access to the minster would be from Greshaugh Green to the west. Such an arrangement would keep the public at arm's length from the bishops' residence and deer-parks.

However, the description of the minster given by the topographer Edmund Gillingwater (c. 1735–1813) following a personal inspection of the site in June 1804 loudly warns against any premature conclusions being drawn about the building's antiquity or purpose. In his MS History of Suffolk,⁴² Gillingwater noted that the whole enclosure had recently been converted to arable by spade and plough. He implied that the number of 'broken fragments of urns containing calcined ashes' uncovered in the process was substantial and concluded that '...those Danes [*sic*] buried their Relations, Friends and Countrymen in the Area adjoining to this Temple, first burning their bodies and inclosing the ashes in earthen urns according to the rites of paganism.' Clearly, the task of ascertaining whether or not the foundations of the Anglo-Saxon cathedral lie immediately under South Elmham minster or, indeed, anywhere else in 'le Mynsterclos' remains firmly in the hands of the archaeologists.

NOTES

(All MSS cited, unless otherwise specified, are held at the Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.)

1 P.R.O., SC 6/1141/1 (1324–26) – a bundle of much-abbreviated accounts from the vacancy following the death of John Salmon (1229–1325); P.R.O., SC 6/996/3 (1414–15); B.L. Harl. Rolls, L. 29 (1398–99); Staffordshire R.O., D 641/1/2/258 – undated (14th-century) reeve's account (microfilm in S.R.O.I., JC1/20/1).

- 2 HA 12; note also the list of Adair Additional MSS in the same collection.
- 3 Woodward 1874, 1–7.
- 4 Bernard Woodward, B.A.(Lond.), F.S.A. (1810–69). For the last nine years of his life he was Librarian to Queen Victoria at Windsor.
- 5 *Illustrated London News*, 19 and 26 Dec. 1846.
- 6 HA 12/C2/67 (1393–94).
- 7 HA 12/C2/59 (1344): ‘... de herbagio monasterii’.
- 8 HA 12/C2/Add. no. 175 (1350–51); ‘... in gappis opstupandis per loca circa le Mynsterclos’.
- 9 HA 12/C2/59 (1344): ‘Et de ijs. vjd. de herbagio in curia grangie et Chapellane dimisso. . .’.
- 10 HA 12/C2/Add. no. 29 (1363–64): ‘... de herbagio infra monasterium et fossata ibidem nil quia depascuntur cum vaccis domini’.
- 11 HA 12/C2/61 (1349–50): 49 acres were sown ‘apud Menstrewong’.
- 12 HA 12/C2/67 (1393–94): ‘In j carpentario conducto per j diem assidente iij barres apud le Minstremewe ubi sepes prostratur per superfluitatem aque. . .’.
- 13 Flixton Priory court rolls, c.1350 (HA 12), *passim*.
- 14 HA 12/C2/60.
- 15 HA 12/C2/66 (1391–92): ‘Et pro j sepe supra la comb ibidem facienda. . .’.
- 16 *Ibid.*: ‘In diversis hominibus conductis . . . pro spinis trahendis in dicto fossato per billam . . .’.
- 17 Tile production at South Elmham will require a specialised study. Manufacture was first recorded on the roll for 1370–71, the first year of Henry le Despenser’s tenure of the bishopric (HA 12/Add. no. 34). The roll for 1398–99 (B.L., Harl. Rolls L. 29) gives details of ‘Thaktyls’, ‘Pathyngtyl’, ‘Ruftylys’ and ‘Holttyls’.
- 18 HA 12/C2/74; this account also refers to the manufacture of tiles called ‘Bryke’ for the repair of the chapel in the inner court.
- 19 HA 12/C2/66.
- 20 HA 12/C2/67.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Suckling 1846, 1, 222.
- 23 HA 12/C2/58.
- 24 HA 12/C2/58: ‘Liberatum pro dealbacione dicte Capelle et parietum et claustri. . .’.
- 25 HA 12/Add. no. 175 (1350–51).
- 26 *Ibid.*: ‘In ij hominibus per xxvij dies . . . crestantibus aulam cum porcha . . . ij claustra, dressour, lardarium, solarium super pontem [etc.]’.
- 27 HA 12/C2/58: ‘In sublevacione veteris claustri’.
- 28 HA 12/C2/61 (1349–50).
- 29 HA 12/C2/62B (1355–56).
- 30 HA 12/C2/58.
- 31 *Ibid.*: ‘. . . et xvij costumariis falcantibus . . . apud holdhallested’.
- 32 Martin *et al.* 1986, 147–50.
- 33 Scarfe 1976, 80.
- 34 Dodwell 1974, no. 112, pp. 60–62. ‘Apud Norwicum reparavi domum de viginti libris de dominio de Thorp quod retinui in manu mea; in Suffolchia de Elmham quam emi de Willelmo de Neveris; de Eccles quam redemi a rege Henrico sexaginta libris; manerium de Colkirke’.
- 35 For his most recent essay on this subject, see Scarfe 1986, 55–71.
- 36 P.R.O., SC 6/1141/1, f. 8: ‘Et in vadimonio unius hominis custodientis manerium et libertatem eiusdem, capientis per septimanam xijd.’
- 37 HA 12/Add. no. 12, piece no. 6: ‘The devysion between Elmham and Bungaye callyd the hundryd mere or Wrongate Waye’.
- 38 For a discussion of these hundreds, see Douglas 1928, 380.
- 39 HA 12/Add. no. 175 (1350–51). Several rolls of the later 14th century record the lease of two other mills, one in the parish of St Margaret and the other in the parish of St Nicholas. These were windmills supplementing Homersfield watermill.
- 40 The cloisters and the chapel were not the only features at South Elmham Hall built for religious purposes. There was also an oratory ‘next to the Lord’s chamber’ (HA 12/C2/69, 1428–29). The roll for 1372–73 (HA 12/C2/65) appears to record the existence of a register-house.
- 41 The results of this work are published below, pp. 233, 34.
- 42 In private possession.

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Abbreviations for MSS

- B.L. British Library.
- P.R.O. Public Record Office.