

REVIEW

R. ALLEN BROWN, general editor: *Suffolk Charters* (Suffolk Records Society and Boydell and Brewer Ltd, Woodbridge, Suffolk)

Vol. i *Leiston Abbey Cartulary and Butley Priory Charters*, ed. Richard Mortimer (1979), xiv + 174 pp.

Vol. ii *Blythburgh Priory Cartulary, Part One*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (1980), xiii + 135 pp.

Vol. iii *Blythburgh Priory Cartulary, Part Two*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (1981), 137 pp.
(Individual volumes £15; £10 to subscribers; £8 to members of the Suffolk Records Society.)

Well done the Suffolk Records Society! Here at last is the series which will put Suffolk securely on the map of feudal England. West Suffolk is partially known because of the rather haphazard publication of selected archives of Bury St Edmunds, but East Suffolk is very much a *terra incognita*. It is good that we are now being given the material which will make a thorough investigation of it possible.

Charters are title-deeds. Most of those that have survived record gifts to religious houses, but they tell us also a great deal about the secular society around them. The laymen who made the gifts usually did so for the salvation of the souls of themselves and their nearest relatives — parents, grandparents, wife, children — all of whom may (with luck) be named. Their charters therefore give a lot of genealogical material; those of Leiston and Butley are particularly valuable for Glanville, those of Blythburgh for Chesney. They also tell us about rents and services, the pattern of the fields, roads and woodland and enable us to catch a glimpse of the Suffolk landscape as it was, since they explain which areas were next to which and how they lay in relation to some message, road or bridge.

In some ways, however, the pattern can be deceptive, particularly if one makes the mistake of thinking of each cartulary or archive as geographically self-contained. The estates of most landholders were not compact; those of Blythburgh Priory interlocked with those of Leiston Abbey. Anyone might have guessed that Leiston would have had lands in the adjacent village of Theberton, but not that Blythburgh would have land in that village also. One cannot even treat a county as a watertight compartment; Leiston and Blythburgh both had lands in Norfolk, and the relevant charters were entered in their cartulary and are therefore printed here. On the other hand there are charters referring to Suffolk in the archives of Ely Cathedral (which held, amongst other things, the five-and-a-half hundreds of Wicklaw), Rochester Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, Oseney Abbey, the Knights Hospitaller and so on. A complete picture can be gained only when all the relevant charters have been published and can be studied in their topographical as well as their feudal setting. That is why the present series is to be welcomed so warmly.

Some charters survive in the original, some only in copies. The most useful copies are those which were made by the monks or landlords themselves in books called cartularies. Since the cartularies were compiled for ready reference in the everyday running of the estate, they usually give a bird's-eye view of it, offering important clues as to the way in which it was administered. Any sensible editor will therefore, as in the present volumes, follow the framework of a cartulary, even if he has to intercalate texts from the originals where these have survived. Sometimes, however, there is no cartulary. Butley Abbey had one once, but it has been lost or destroyed, and Dr Mortimer has had to collect his texts painstakingly in various archives and libraries. The foundation charter comes from a 16th-century transcript at Cambridge, the charters of Kings Henry II and Richard I from the *Cartae Antiquae* Rolls in the P.R.O., and the rest from

originals in the British Library (Cotton, Harleian, and Additional charters), the muniments of Ely Cathedral (now at Cambridge), and the Bodleian Library at Oxford. This *diaspora* can be explained partly by sales of the relevant lands at, or after, the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and partly by the activity of collectors; a detailed explanation would have been worth-while, because it would almost certainly have thrown up information of general interest to the local historian.

The Butley Priory charters have been printed in the same volume as the Leiston Abbey cartulary. The reason for this is partly that since there are only 35 of them, they are not sufficient to fill a whole volume, and partly that Butley and Leiston had the same founder, Ranulf de Glanville. When he founded Leiston (1171) he was, though a Suffolk man, sheriff of Yorkshire. Twelve years later when he founded Leiston he was chief justiciar of the whole kingdom, but curiously enough his second foundation did not prove to be as wealthy as the first. Perhaps this was because it was for Premonstratensian rather than Augustinian canons, for the Premonstratensians modelled themselves on the Cistercians and insisted on poverty. They also adopted the Cistercian system of centralized government with a strict hierarchy of daughter-houses. This latter feature does not seem to have appealed very much to Ranulf de Glanville, for he went to some lengths to make it appear that his foundation at Leiston was not a simple daughter-house of any one Premonstratensian Abbey; he got his first abbot from Durford and his first canons from Welbeck. The whole story is related in the Welbeck Abbey cartulary, and though it has been printed and discussed by H. M. Colvin in *The White Canons in England* (1951), it is perhaps a pity that it was not reprinted as an appendix to this volume.

Blythburgh Priory was a good deal poorer than Leiston, but its cartulary is a good deal longer, containing 490 items as opposed to 119. It also occupies two volumes in this series. The pagination is continuous and amounts to 246 pages excluding the index, and one must therefore assume that the reason for its being split into two must have been to ensure that subscribers received one volume every year. Generations of users will find the division inconvenient but will tolerate it because of the interest of the contents. Like Butley, Blythburgh was an Augustinian house, but it was older and a good deal less important, being a dependency of the abbey of St Osyth at Chich in Essex. Its possessions included a few churches and a large number of small holdings, occasionally as small as half an acre or an annual rent of one penny, and consisting often of marshland or turbary. With the exception of the Chesney family, most of the priory's benefactors were minor folk, but their charters give fascinating glimpses of the social structure, and of social mobility, at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. One serf who had been granted to the priory with his progeny managed to purchase his land as a freeman for 100 shillings (nos. 227, 241). The fact that he was able to find such a large sum of money is eloquent testimony to the exceptional wealth of the district.

I hope that enough has now been said to explain the interest of this series. Those who buy the volumes will find that reference to them is a continual pleasure. They are well edited, sensibly annotated and provided with excellent indexes. Bound in hard covers they are (for these days) remarkably cheap. They deserve the most widespread support.

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