THE MEDIEVAL PRIORY AT HINCKLEY

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This paper examines material relating to the medieval alien priory of Hinckley, its occupants and the buildings which are thought to have survived the Dissolution. Earlier material relating to the priory has been re-examined and considered, along with later information not then available, to offer a new perspective on the size of the priory, and influence in Leicestershire and surrounding counties.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE PRIORY

It has long been thought that Hinckley priory was simply a cell of two monks who acted as rent collectors for the abbey of Lire in Normandy and that there were no remains of this priory. A dig by the Hinckley Field Walking Group (now the Hinckley Archaeological Society) in 2004/05 discovered walls which were dated by finds to the medieval period.

Documentary research seems to suggest that the priory may have been larger than was thought previously, and may indeed have been conventual.

The foundation of the priory has been attributed to William Fitz Osbern and Hugh de Grenelesmainel in the eleventh century, but as there is no confirmation of this in the 1120 charter of Henry I, this is unlikely to have been the case.1 An abbot of Lire may have been present in this country in the 1140s,2 and a Papal Bull of 1148 which confirmed that Hinckley church belonged to the abbey of Lire suggests that Robert de Bossu, the Earl of Leicester, is more likely to have been the founder.3 It is thought that he may have been influenced by his wife with regard to some of his gifts to religious foundations,4 and he had already given the priory of Wareham, in Dorset, to the Abbey of Lire in 1139.5 Amice, the wife of the earl and granddaughter of Fitz Osbern, brought with her in 1121, as part of her dower, the Honour of Breteuil, in Normandy, whose principal abbey was the Abbey of Lire. In 1155 the earl also gave to the Abbey of Lire the church of St Nicolas in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, along with the chapel of Attleborough and tithes of a quarry there. That stone from this quarry was found to make up the majority of the medieval building material found in the Hinckley archaeological dig adds credence to the idea that the Earl of Leicester was the founder.6


The signature of a monk of Hinckley, on a document dated between 1163 and 1168, also provides an earlier date than that of ‘before 1173’, as suggested by Smith and London, for the foundation of this priory.

The size and status of the priory

While the extent of the lands granted to the priory was not great and the income being in the region of only £40 per annum, the size of the priory buildings seem to have been greater than that expected for just two monks. The first recorded prior of Hinckley between 1198 and 1216, R. de Aumenesch, was also the proctor of Lire in England and Wales. Given that he and his clerk would have had to travel all over the country in order to carry out the business of the abbey in this country, and also visit the other four priories belonging to the abbey of Lire, it would seem unlikely that there would be no monks present in Hinckley during his time away. This would lead us to conclude that there must have been at least two more monks in residence. There is evidence that Ganthier de Hinkelai, a monk recruited and trained in Hinckley, was resident at the abbey of Lire in the early 1200s; this would bring the number up to five, enough to constitute a choir. The priory would then be able to be conventual; that is, they would be able to carry out all the church services. The appointment of the first two vicars to the Hinckley church in 1237 and 1247 are recorded as being by the Prior and Convent of Hinckley. There is also a reference in 1246/47 to the presenter of the rector of Higham as not just the Prior of Hinckley but the Prior and Convent of Hinckley. The giving of a gift, in this case of land, in return for hospitality in a priory, was a common practice and known as a corrody. H. J. Francis notes:

In the year 1275 Thomas of Attleborough gave a rood of land at Dadlington to the abbey of Lire for the benefit of the priory of Hinckley. The monks, in return, agreed to provide Thomas and his son, if they conducted themselves well in the said priory, and if they performed services suitable to their station, with everything necessary for their clothing, boots, and food, of which they were to have better and more than the domestics of the priory who were called servants of free family.

If in the future Thomas and his son became guilty of any grave fault, the prior was empowered with the right of depriving them of all they had until they had satisfied the judgment of the prior and his brethren, after the second or third monition. We have already seen that at times there were four monks lodging in the priory. Now we have also two guests and servants suggesting there must have been at least ten persons to provide for in the house. This was not all, for among the prior’s duties was that of providing lodging, as far as he was able, for travellers.

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10 Sir Benjamin Stone Collection, Birmingham Central Library, Box 27, Photograph 180.
In the following century there is evidence that this occurred again at Hinckley.\textsuperscript{14} The presence of permanent guests suggests that the priory must have had accommodation for them. This hospitality had been expected and provided for by the giving of the chapels at Stoke Golding, Dadlington and Wykin: ‘to contribute to the sustentation of two monks living in Hinckley, and to the provision of the priory hospitality’.\textsuperscript{15}

Francis argues that because there are no records of visitations to the priory it could not be conventual; others argue that alien priors, while needing permission of the bishop of the diocese to take up their appointment, were only responsible to their abbot with regard to the running of the priory and so were not subject to visitations.\textsuperscript{16} The lack of visitations by the bishop of the diocese therefore does not necessarily rule out the possibility of the priory being conventual, as the representative of the abbey of Lire, the procurator, would have carried out this role.

In 1305 there is evidence of a visitation; this is in the form of a writ addressed to Bishop John Dickenson which refers to the vicarage of Ashby de la Zouch. A John de Ashby was presented to this vicarage by the abbot and convent of Lilleshall, at Hinckley, after inquisition by the official of the archdeacon of Leicester.\textsuperscript{17}

In England, all priories which belonged to alien abbeys, Hinckley included, are referred to as ‘cells’ in the Close Rolls: this gives the impression that they were small gatherings of monks, although, in fact, some of them were conventual.

A Hinckley-Lire document dated 1283, which outlines a dispute between the vicar of St Mary’s church and the abbot of Lire, mentions on four occasions the ‘prior and monks of Hinckley’, and refers to the common seal of the prior and monks.\textsuperscript{18} This reference suggests the likely presence of several monks rather than just two, as well as the possibility that it was a conventual establishment.

In 1377 the Commons urged banishment of all French monks in alien priories, with the exception of members of conventual priories.\textsuperscript{19} As Hinckley priory continued to be occupied after 1377, this would also seem to point to the possibility of it being conventual. A document dated 1397, giving the priory to its prior on payment of a rent of £35 per annum, insists that divine services at the priory must be maintained; another indication that it was a conventual priory.\textsuperscript{20}

The alien priors were summoned before the King and council in 1403, where each was given the opportunity to prove that he was a conventual prior. The


\textsuperscript{16} David Paterson and Ian Rowney (1985: Nuneaton) A \textit{short history of the parish church of St Nicholas}, p. 6.


Conventual priors had their priories restored; all other priories were seized.21 Once again it would seem that the Hinckley prior convinced the Privy Council that his was a conventual priory; he received the priory back from King Henry IV.

Historical documents on this subject often suggest that all alien priories were closed by 1409, or at the latest 1414–15; in fact, only those which were not conventual were closed. In 1409–10, Hinckley priory was in the care of Michael Aufri its prior, and the revenue from the priory was gifted to Joan of Navarre, the wife of Henry IV.22 In 1409 the Abbot of Lire requested permission to send a monk to the priory to administer the revenues, and in 1413, after the death of Henry IV, the new king confirmed the grant of revenue to Joan on condition that she maintained the divine service at the priory; this suggests that monks were still in residence.

In 1415, Thomas Beaufort, Earl of Dorset, persuaded the king to give Hinckley priory to the Carthusian priory of Mountgrace, in Yorkshire, after the completion of the term of the lease of those who held the priory at that time. He made provision in his will of 1426 that the revenue which the Mountgrace priory had to pay to Joan of Navarre would come from the residue of his goods. In 1426 he also paid 500 marks to the Abbey of Lire in recompense for the loss of some of its English property to the Charterhouse of Sheen in 1415. However, the Subsidy of Parishes and Knights Fees granted in June 1428 show that a pension was still being paid by the churches in the Hinckley bailiwick; not to Sheen or Mountgrace, but to Lire. It was not until 1433 that the Charterhouse of Sheen made a successful plea to the Bishop of Lincoln to present a vicar to Witherley church.23 Higham church register states that it was in 1437 that the abbey of Lire was suppressed and the patronage of Higham passed to Sheen.

There is evidence that the buildings of Mountgrace Priory were incomplete when the Duke of Exeter died, and that it was not until 1440, when the grants were confirmed to them in parliament, that the buildings were completed.24 If this is correct then the ownership of Hinckley Priory may have been in dispute until 1440. The Charterhouse of Sheen was still appointing procurators to try to collect their revenues in the Isle of Wight, where the abbey of Lire owned Carisbrooke Priory, in 1444.

Further evidence of this possibility is found in a dispute between the prioress and convent of Eton [Nuneaton], and the abbey of Lire, over tithes within Eton and Hinckley in 1446, which was resolved when Lire withdrew its claim on the proviso that ‘the prioress and Convent of Nuneaton would pay 3s 4d…to Hinckley church’.25

The Charterhouse of Sheen was still asking for confirmation of its properties from the king in 1459,26 and Mountgrace Priory was also asking for Hinckley Priory in...
1462. The slow transfer from the Abbey of Lire to Mountgrace priory might indicate that Hinckley Priory was conventual. To be a conventual priory there would need to be buildings which would be able to accommodate all the functions of a priory, and there is at least some evidence to show that such buildings may well have existed.

The drawing of St Mary’s church Hinckley, on the Robinson Map of 1791, shows the church having a southern transept, as does the drawing of the church from Nichols dated 1782. This southern transept in a parish church is unusual unless a church has a central tower; few churches in Leicestershire have transepts.28 The presence of the southern transept suggests that it may have been part of the eastern arm of the priory buildings.

One source notes ‘that nearly forty cells …of such abbeys in Normandy…as Cormeilles…were large enough to warrant churches of considerable size, some of them shared between their small monastic communities and the laity of their parish’.29 A second source asserts that: ‘One church in the town [of Hinckley] served...
the needs of the townspeople and the priory.\textsuperscript{30} The bay from the rear of the priory building may have been connected to the west end of the church and another to the southern transept (Fig. 1 above). The size of the priory, its ability to survive questions regarding its status, the arrangement of its buildings and those of the church, all seem to point to the priory being a conventual establishment.

**THE PRIORS OF HINCKLEY**

With regard to the priors of Hinckley there is little to add to the comprehensive work of Smith and London on the Heads of Religious Houses in England and Wales, although a little further information has emerged which sheds some new light on the priors and their work. As already noted, R. de Aumenesch, who was also the proctor of the Abbot and Convent of Lire, is recorded as prior sometime between 1198 and 1216. There was also a Richard as prior of Hinckley between 1209 and 1211.\textsuperscript{31} Combining these records with a further reference to a payment made to the prior of Hinckley by Simon de Montfort in 1207/08 further buttresses the presence of a prior at Hinckley before 1224. The discovery of a collection of writs, mandates, notifications and acts from the thirteenth century, relevant to the priors of Hinckley, in the archives of King’s College Cambridge, allows for new insights into the Hinckley priors.\textsuperscript{32} These documents, which have not been referred to previously by local historians, reveal that four of the Hinckley priors between 1261 and 1290 were papal judge delegates who travelled around some of the neighbouring counties of Leicestershire to take part in ecclesiastical courts, as well as presiding over similar courts at Hinckley. This brings the total of priors at Hinckley who are known to have been papal judge delegates to six. Some of the documents are in excellent condition, and some have been transcribed and translated. They mainly concern disputes between the abbey of Conches, which lay only a few miles from the abbey of Lire in Normandy, and various individuals in this country with regard to debts owed to the abbey.

While some of these documents originated at Hinckley, others are signed at Wootton Wawen in Warwickshire which was a priory of the abbey of Conches. As these documents do not seem to have been published before, those that have been transcribed and translated are produced in full below.

While WOW 479 is concerned with the appointment of a second proctor, it also gives information about the prior of Hinckley being someone whose initial was N or possibly H:

> To the venerable gentleman and prudent lord N[H], prior of Hynkeley an ecclesiastical judge appointed by the lord pope or one acting on his behalf, G of Aqua procurator of the Abbot and Convent of Conches greetings in the lord. In all causes moved or to be moved by apostolic authority in our presence concerning our person and the above said abbot and convent in what way so ever, we appoint our beloved cleric William Comyn as our proctor and that of the said abbot and convent. To be held


\textsuperscript{32} Archives of King’s College Cambridge, King’s/KC/KCAP/WOW/ 236, 479, 412, 299.
holy and in a state of grace whatever W[illiam] should think fit to do in our causes in our presence or your chosen delegates whatsoever against whatsoever adversaries of ours on whatsoever days and places in our name or the name of the said abbot and convent; giving to the same W[illiam] power of swearing against our soul and against the souls of the said abbot and convent concerning accusation and verification and whatsoever other type of executing an oath, performing, making a fine, appealing and doing all the other duties which are to be performed by a second proctor. And in return for the same judging we promise to mitigate as often as it should befall defendants to approach us from time to time. Given at Wootton on the Friday before the feast of Saint Dionysius the martyr [6th Oct.] in the year of our lord 1273.

If the letter used as the initial of the prior is an H then it could mean that there is a prior at Hinckley who was not known before, or, much more likely, if the initial is an N then it would confirm that Nicholas dictus Bynet was a prior at Hinckley as well as proctor in England of the abbey of Lire.

WOW 412 is a mandate issued at Hinckley in 1280 and is self explanatory. It does perhaps show the respect afforded by the Dean of Kidderminster to the mandate and its sender, the prior of Hinckley.

To the venerable religious gentleman the lord prior of Hinckley, judge delegated by the lord pope, the Dean of Kidderminster sends greetings in the lord. I received your mandate in these words: The prior of Hinckley judge delegated by the lord pope in the Diocese of Lincoln, to the prudent gentleman dean of the same, sends greetings in the lord. By the authority of the lord pope which we exercise ...we instruct you by firmly enjoining you that you should warn and officially bring the rector of Elmley Lovvet before any proctor of the Abbey and Convent of Conches concerning a certain master ? Shingori? [and bring] the same before the proctor on account of his manifest contumacy...[next line and a half unclear] whom forthwith in these writings we suspend from entry in to church and in the church of Elmley Lovvet you should announce that he is thus suspended and if you do this immediately within a certain period...then in these writings of excommunication in the said church on Sundays and festivals when the bells have been rung and the candles lit, you should denounce him as excommunicated, announcing nonetheless that he should appear before us or one acting on our behalf in the parish church of Hinckley on the fourth day of jurisdiction after the feast of saint Matthew the apostle [24th Feb.] in your court to enquire what is just between the said proctor and the same. Therefore you should take care to certify that this mandate of ours has been carried out through your letters patent containing the purport of these matters on the said day and place. Dated at Hinckley on Tuesday next after the octave of the purification of the blessed Mary in the year of our lord one thousand two hundred and eighty. This mandate of yours has been fully carried out by all. Dated at brunne. (Brome? Co Staff.) on Thursday next before the feast of Saint ? in the year above written.

Document WOW 299, below, shows how quickly communication could take place between Hinckley and Hereford, and how seriously the mandate was taken and how quickly the sub-dean acted on it. The letter dated on 17 May, at Hinckley, had been delivered to Hereford and acted on by the 24th of the same month:

To the lord gentleman of venerable judgment the prior of Hinckley, ecclesiastical judge appointed by the lord pope I Adam [?] lord Hereford send greetings in the lord. I have received a command written in these words: the prior of Hynckely, ecclesiastical judge appointed by the lord pope sends greetings in the lord to the sub-dean in Hereford. By the authority of the aforesaid lord pope which we exercise
in this regard which we advise you of looking into matters [text unclear]...and surrendering to you in virtue of the obedience by which we are held to the apostolic seat by firmly enjoining you we instruct as far as it is understood, the cleric Ricard Mainward [?of] Hereford that he should appear before us or our commissary in the church of the blessed Mary of Nottingham on the next day of jurisdiction after the feast of saint Barnaby the apostle [11th June] for the sake of offering to the Abbot and Convent of Conches formal responses and answers as his justice owes. And whereas then you should make to us or our commissary on the said day and place payment of a third of the rent through your letters patent containing the purport of these matters. Given at Hynckely on the eve of the Ascension [17th May] of the Lord in the year of the same 1284. Which letter of mandate has been executed by all the reverent officers of the dean. Given at Hereford on the Wednesday next [24th May] after the feast of Saint Dunstan in the year of the lord aforesaid 1284.

The Hereford Cathedral Archives reveal that one of the priors of Hinckley, Hervey de Alneto, was a proctor of the Abbot and Convent of Lire before he served as prior at Hinckley.\textsuperscript{33} Five priors – R. de Aumenesch, John de Capella, Nicholas dictus Bynet, Reyner de Jarieta and Michael Aufri – were proctors whilst at Hinckley. Three – Nicholas dictus Bynet, Michael de Gayniaco and possibly William de Arena – were proctors subsequent to being priors at Hinckley.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

Nine of the 23 known priors of Hinckley carried the high office of the proctor or representative of the abbey of Lire in England and Wales, responsible for five priories. The abbey was a prestigious establishment, famous for its illustrated manuscripts, with strong links to the wife of the Earl of Leicester. Six of the priors between 1226 and 1284 are known to have been papal judge delegates. Given the status of these monks and their connections, in addition to the evidence regarding the size of Hinckley Priory and the possibility that it may have been conventual, it would seem that, if Hinckley was once a small cell of only two monks, it did not remain so for long.

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APPENDIX

At the time of the original article going to print, the documents WOW 475 and WOW 236 had not been transcribed or translated, but as they have now been completed they are added here. WOW 475 is interesting as it refers to a William de Arena as the general proctor in England of the abbey of Lire. There was a prior of Hinckley with the same name who is said to have resigned in 128934 or to have died.35 If it was a resignation and not a death it is possible that this was the same person:

Be it known to all by these present [letters] that I brother William of Arena, general proctor in England of the religious monks of the Abbot and Convent of Lire have received by the hand of brother Geoffrey of Aqua proctor of the religious monks of the Abbot and Convent of Conches five marks of the remaining eleven sterling marks in which the said religious men of Conches were bound to us from the time of brother John Barker then proctor for the time being of the same. In witness of which thing, my seal is attached. Dated at Wotton on the Sunday before the translation of St Benedict [9th July] in the year of our lord 1290.

WOW 236 is concerned with the appointment of a proctor in a dispute between the abbey of Conches and the rector of the church of Bramberg. This is one of the earliest King’s College documents mentioning a prior of Hinckley as a papal judge advocate:

To the venerable and prudent lord prior of Hynkely an ecclesiastical judge appointed by the lord pope or to his commissary, brother William procurator of the abbey and convent of St Peter of Castellione Genet in au….Greetings in the lord. In the cause which is due to come before you by apostolic authority on the morrow of the blessed pope Gregory [13 Mar.] in the greater church of Coventry between the said abbey and convent on one part and the rector of the church of Bramberg [?Bromesgrove] on the other part I appoint master Andrew de Stretton procurator of the same to be held holy and in a state of grace whatever the same Andrew in the said cause should think fit to do on the said day and place and on whatsoever days and places in the name of the same, giving to the same Andrew the power of swearing against the souls of the same concerning the charge and concerning speaking the truth and of taking whatsoever type of oath against the souls of the same and of doing all the things in the name of the same which can be done by a procurator of law. To the same Andrew as above I offer judgement alone. I mark this with a cross for those in opposition. Dated at Wootton [Wawen] on the eve of the feast of Gregory the pope [11th Mar.] in the year of our lord one thousand two hundred and sixty one.

34 John Nichols, The History and Antiquities of the county of Leicester, vol. 1, part 1, Appendix, p. 8: