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0521804523 - The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales, 940-1216 - Second Edition

Edited by David Knowles, C. N. L. Brooke and Vera C. M. London

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I. *The purpose and scope of this book*

This book aims at providing lists of all the known superiors of the religious houses that existed in England and Wales between 940 and 1216. The term religious house is understood as covering all establishments of monks, regular canons and nuns, whether of abbatial or lower rank and whether autonomous or dependent. Roughly speaking, therefore, it comprises all the houses existing between these dates that are listed in the relevant sections of *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* – all, that is, save those of whose heads we know nothing – but the military orders are not included, nor are hospitals. Similarly, the groups of nuns staffing hospitals or serving guests or pilgrims on the outskirts of an abbey are not included unless they ranked as a religious community possessed of an income and domestic autonomy.

Four classes of establishment are represented: the autonomous abbey; the autonomous priory; the dependent priory with regular life; and smaller houses, priories or cells, whose exact status it is often difficult to define. Our lists make no claim to classify or divide the last group, as *Medieval Religious Houses* attempts to do; our concern is solely with the heads of all houses (save hospitals and the like) who are called in the documents abbots and priors. The exact distinction, in terms of authority and prestige, between the classes of abbots and priors, and the *raison d'être* of the status of a given house, are by no means as easy to define as might be expected. As a rule of thumb, Benedictine autonomous houses normally, but not always, had abbots, and size and wealth are a rough criterion; dependent houses are always priories, as were also Cluniac monasteries, however wealthy and important (e.g. Lewes). Cistercian monks and Premonstratensian canons, save in the rare cases of small dependencies, always had an abbot as superior. Augustinian canons, on the other hand, normally had priors, but during our period some 25 out of 180 had abbots, and though the majority of the abbeys are the largest and wealthiest houses (e.g. Cirencester), a few (e.g. Notley and Wigmore) are not. The reason for the distinction must often be sought in historical circumstances. It might be that a founder's intentions for endowment, upon which abbatial rank was assumed, failed to materialise. The Gilbertine canons had priors, but the head of the order, normally resident at Sempringham, was Master. Among the nuns a similar lack of uniformity prevailed. Abbesses were uncommon among Benedictine nuns save in the pre-Conquest houses; they are scanty among the

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Austin (Augustinian) canonesses, rare among the Cistercians and non-existent among the Premonstratensians. Sometimes the status of the house changed; more often, especially among the Austin canons, contemporaries used the wrong term. In any case, our lists record status; we do not ordinarily explain it.

The contents of our lists are explained in detail on pp. 16–20. We took *c.* 940 as the year when monastic life was revived in England by Dunstan at Glastonbury. For practical purposes of chronology, King John's death in 1216 is the most convenient date in the early thirteenth century; it was chosen also because the years round about mark an epoch in the history of the religious orders. The Fourth Lateran Council in the previous year (1215), the death of Innocent III (1216) and the birth of the two orders of friars all help to change the picture. From about that date, too, the survival of so many governmental and episcopal records and other religious documents give more plentiful information, and render many of the lists of superiors already in print fuller and more reliable.

The value of such lists, which vary in completeness, will be clear at once to a practising medievalist. Many events, great and small, bear no date in the normal narrative sources, but can often be dated, at least within a few years, by charters of foundation, of gifts, and of agreements. There is a mass of undated charters in this period; but they were usually witnessed or approved by a group of worthies, varying in dignity according to the importance of the occasion, and often containing heads of neighbouring monasteries. If the limiting dates of the term of office or life of one or more of these is known, and if also some names are common to other similar documents, the date of compilation of the document itself can often be ascertained within a narrow margin. This in turn may give us greater precision for a totally different occasion, and so a mass of information gradually builds up for the whole period. There are many other uses of these lists. Thus, taken as a whole, they will present for the first time a record as full as the evidence allows of the number and provenance of superiors from overseas in English houses from *c.* 1050 onwards. They reveal cases of pluralism, and of the practice in some orders of an able superior passing through several houses. They show the gradual elimination of superiors of Anglo-Saxon nationality or nomenclature; and also the affiliations of the early houses of Austin canons. Indeed, all precise factual information extends our knowledge of a religious community, and on the lowest and widest level there is a satisfaction in knowing what abbot was ruling a house when this or that event or building took place, and in being able to see his relationship in the past to this or another community. A medievalist will find in these lists many a glimpse of the world that he is trying to recover and to understand. The bare statement

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that many Norman and French abbots were appointed to English monasteries may be illuminated by a glance at three or four of the greatest houses.

Westminster from 1076 to *c.* 1158 had the following abbots: Geoffrey, an unsuccessful Norman; Vitalis, a monk of Fécamp and abbot of Bernay; Gilbert Crispin the writer, a monk of Bec; Herbert, a monk of Westminster of unknown origin; and Gervase of Blois, a natural son of King Stephen, deposed *c.* 1158. Glastonbury between *c.* 1081/2 and 1171 had the following: Thurstan, a monk of Caen; Herluin, another monk from Caen; Seffrid, a monk of Séez; Henry of Blois, the royal Cluniac, who held the abbacy for forty-five years, putting in as prior Robert, a Cluniac from Lewes. St Albans between 1077 and 1166 had: Paul, a monk of Caen and a nephew of Lanfranc; Richard, of Norman (possibly baronial) family; Geoffrey de Gorron, another Norman of baronial family; Ralph, an Englishman; and Robert de Gorron, a nephew of Geoffrey. Peterborough, from 1069 to 1155 had: Turolde, a warlike monk of Fécamp moved from Malmesbury to contain Hereward; Matthew, a monk of Mont-S.-Michel; Ernulf, a monk of Beauvais, before becoming prior of Canterbury; John, a monk of Séez; Henry of Poitou, monk and prior of Cluny, bishop-elect of several sees and an ecclesiastical adventurer on a unique scale; and Martin, a monk of Bec and prior of St Neots. Some such pattern can be found in many of the monasteries and in almost every case the line of overseas abbots came to an end in the first half of the reign of Henry II, which implies that appointments from abroad lessened during the latter half of the reign of Stephen.

A few houses stand out as particularly fortunate or unlucky in their superiors. In the first class stands St Albans. During the whole of our period after the arrival of Abbot Paul in 1077 the house was governed by a succession of men who, whatever may have been their personal failings as seen through the eyes of critical chroniclers, were individuals of personality who were also monks by vocation. At the other extreme the equally wealthy and celebrated abbey of Glastonbury had a series of irregular happenings. After the deposition of the last English abbot by Lanfranc in 1078, the house was ruled on and off for twenty years by the tactless and ruthless Thurstan. Then, after twenty-five years of regular rule, broken at least once for some years by a long vacancy, the monks had for forty-five years as titular abbot the magnificent Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester. Henry doubtless kept the place solvent, under a Cluniac prior, but it is perhaps no accident that the history of the house is virtually a blank for those years. Henry's death was followed by a vacancy of eighteen months, and another vacancy extending over nine years occurred soon after. Finally, in the last decades of our period, Glastonbury was harassed by the attempts, temporarily successful, of Bishop Savaric to engross the abbey.

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Somewhat unexpectedly, a summary glance at a number of houses shows that many abbots were long-lived. Given the common disinclination of a conservative community to elect a young man this is somewhat surprising, yet for many of the largest houses there were no more than eight or ten abbacies between the first appointment after the Conquest and the end of John's reign, giving an average tenure of over twelve years. This figure, however, is modest compared with the still more striking figure of eighteen years, the average for bishops of the age. These figures are a warning that the frequent emphasis by historians on the short expectation of life in the middle ages is only valid with certain qualifications; but on the other hand we must remember that in both classes of appointment there were numerous intermissions of a year or even longer between a demise and the subsequent appointment.

The term of office of cathedral priors was notably shorter than that of abbots, as may be seen at a glance at the two large Canterbury houses. The priors lacked the cachet bestowed in the abbatial blessing, which grew liturgically till it resembled an episcopal consecration, and had not, like an abbot, security for life. They were vulnerable to domestic revolts and to episcopal acts of power, and resignations and depositions were not rare. In addition they were candidates ready to hand for abbeys in search of a superior; Winchester in particular lost several of its priors in this way. Finally, a popular prior was the obvious choice for the monks who formed the chapter of their cathedral and though several such choices were refused by the king or other interested parties, one would now and again get home.

Equally short, in some cases, was the term of office of a Cluniac prior. In some cases, this was because the abbot of Cluny, or some mediate superior, replaced the priors from time to time; it was also because the leading Cluniac houses, Bermondsey and Lewes in particular, were favourite recruiting grounds from which abbots were taken to Reading, Faversham, Evesham, Glastonbury and even further afield. The list for Bermondsey has a special interest, since it raises too in an extreme form the critical problem of how the house preserved its records. The relation between these lists and the documents is discussed on pp. 6-7; cf. pp. 114ff., 266-7.

We give here deliberately only a selection of some of the points which may be noted in the lists: our purpose is to offer them for others' use, not to anticipate what that use may be. Clearly the compilation of such lists provides many aperçus into social and religious history, and the most substantial ground for a survey of monastic recruitment in the period. It also reveals points of interest which may not be anticipated. Thus at first sight the Gilbertine Order gives only lists of names of men who can never (save the founder himself, St Gilbert of Sempringham) be more than names. But the repetition of the same names

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in different lists – including some of exceptional rarity – suggests that it was a common practice to move a prior from house to house after a few years (p. 200; cf. p. 289), and that this was done on a scale without parallel elsewhere.

The Cistercians, who did not spread widely over England until the fifth decade of the twelfth century, show generally no influx of overseas superiors after the first abbot of a colony from the continent. Here the chief interest of the lists is to reveal the progress of a successful abbot from house to house, or the frequency of elections of a stranger, often a sign that the abbey, or a visiting abbot, felt the need of new blood.

Among the Austin canons, the provenance of priors or abbots sometimes gives welcome evidence of the filiation of one house from another. It shows also, as we have seen with the black monks, that certain houses were more distinguished or fortunate than others. Thus the London priory of Aldgate had a succession of long-lived priors who were also theologians and chroniclers of note. Dunstable, Merton and St Osyth's (Essex) were equally distinguished, and a prior of the last-named became archbishop of Canterbury in 1123. The imagination lingers over the name of Andrew of St Victor, a celebrated biblical scholar of English birth, who had two spells of office at Wigmore, deep in rural Herefordshire. His presence is partly explained by the interest previously taken in Wigmore by the bishop of Hereford, Robert of Bethune, a distinguished teacher, but it is one more instance of the cultural unity of western Europe in this century.

II. *The materials*

At one time it was fashionable to argue about the relative merits of the chronicle and the charter as historical evidence: some scholars held up the charter to our admiration as an authentic, contemporary and objective witness; the chronicle as biased, subjective, liable to every wind of human error. The contrast no longer seems so clear: the authenticity of the charter is a matter for investigation, not assertion; it often needs careful interpretation; contrariwise, it has always been recognised that chronicles and annals contain a mass of authentic information.¹ Every kind of evidence is grist to the historian's mill: none of it can be accepted without critical enquiry. The lists contained in this book are based mainly on the evidence of chronicles and annals and charters; with copious help from obituaries and calendars, and occasional help from mortuary rolls, saints' lives, biographies, inscriptions, and other evidence. No

¹ See especially the wise comments of C. R. Cheney, *The Records of Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1956). Reference for individual chronicles, and, in some cases, discussion of their value, are given at the head of the lists. For a general survey of monastic chronicles, see the forthcoming book by Mrs A. Gransden [1974].

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detailed study of the nature of each type of evidence can be attempted here; but a brief analysis of the problems of using chronicle, calendar and charter evidence is a necessary introduction to the lists themselves; and the pre-Conquest sections, though not a large part of the whole, raise peculiar problems and demand a special explanation, which will be given in section III.

Monastic communities had long and tenacious memories. A fifteenth-century chronicle can retail entirely reliable information about eleventh-century abbots. Unfortunately, it can also, obviously enough, provide entirely unreliable evidence, and it can be a delicate matter to decide the status of many late entries. It is clear that there is a world of difference between the value of a contemporary entry in one of the eleventh-century versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the fifteenth-century annals of Bermondsey, which Rose Graham investigated in a well-known article and rejected altogether as evidence.¹ To help distinguish the value of local chronicles a note is given, where appropriate, of the date (and sometimes the nature) of these at the head of the lists. Where appropriate, we also note useful discussions of chronicles of wider range in the bibliography. But in many cases judgement is more subtle and difficult than this, and the present book can be no substitute for a critical survey of monastic annals.

Miss Graham's strictures on the Bermondsey annals were primarily due to the hopeless discrepancies between their lists of priors of Bermondsey and other evidence, especially for the thirteenth century; and the inveterate habit of the scribe who compiled them of converting one prior into two or three. Further study has established the fact that they are more reliable for the eleventh and twelfth centuries than for the thirteenth and fourteenth. This is at first sight paradoxical; but a little reflection readily explains how this can happen, and there are indeed several analogies. The author of the annals (if he can be dignified by the word) made incompetent use of varied materials: he seems to have worked from a mixture of earlier annals and lists of priors. It seems likely that there was an early and good set of annals which provided less opportunity for error in the period down to c. 1200 than the later material. Even in the twelfth century there is a slight tendency to multiply priors, and we have relegated obvious duplicates to footnotes; we have also indicated clearly where dates or names depend wholly on the annals; but with the aid of other evidence and by making judicious use of the annals a reliable list for the period can be compiled.

We are on safer ground with the Evesham and the Gloucester chronicles. The Evesham chronicle as we have it was compiled by Thomas of Marlborough at the outset of the thirteenth century; but it has been shown that the section relating to the eminent Abbot Æthelwig in the mid-eleventh century is a notice written perhaps by Prior Dominic c. 1110 and incorporated in the later compi-

¹ See p. 114; but see also pp. 266-7.

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lation. For Gloucester we have thirteenth and early fifteenth-century witnesses from which an excellent contemporary record of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries can be reconstructed with some confidence, although the reconstruction is complicated by the fact that the Gloucester chronicle bore some relation to the spider's web of west country annals with its centre in John of Worcester's compilation.¹

These chronicles and their satellites provide information locally preserved of local abbots. There is abundant evidence that it was normal for monastic houses to be well provided with records of this kind, even though later scribes might quite often misunderstand the evidence before them. There are occasional astonishing lapses. Thus St Albans, famous for its historical tradition in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, seems to have retained only the haziest memory of its pre-Conquest history,² a memory perhaps affected by loss of documents (a common difficulty, made worse in many cases for the modern scholar by the practice of filling the gaps by fabrication), perhaps too by controversy as to the situation of St Alban's relics. The converse of this is the case of a chronicler like William of Malmesbury, who was interested in many houses, and whose *Gesta Pontificum* contains a wealth of information which almost makes us claim him as a fellow-author of this book.

Even William offers difficulties. If the scribe at Bermondsey was careless, William, in a sense, was too scholarly. Armitage Robinson showed³ that Hearne's edition of the *De Antiquitate* of Glastonbury represented an interpolated and confused version of what William wrote; and even when allowance has been made for this, that William had dated the pre-Conquest abbots, not in the main from annals, but by comparison of an earlier list of abbots with dated charters, often of doubtful authenticity. William's book represents a peak in historical research for its period; but his results are commonly of little critical value. Where the charters survive, however, they can be used directly; and it is possible to deduce the list of abbots with which he worked and compare it with an earlier surviving version, of the late tenth century.

Lists of abbots and priors are common; they provide valuable but treacherous evidence: treacherous, because they brought out the worst in careless scribes, because we often do not know how they were compiled, and because the chronological data can be ambiguous. The practice of keeping lists of kings and bishops, sometimes with notes of the length of their reigns, was ancient, and king-lists formed the most important chronological foundations for Bede's *Historia*.⁴ Many surviving lists of monastic superiors were based on notes made

¹ See R. R. Darlington in *EHR*, XLVIII (1933), 1-10; *MO*, pp. 704-5 (Evesham); on Ch. Gloucester, see p. 52; also R. R. Darlington in *WMVW*, pp. xvff., on John of Worcester [and John W., II and III].

² See pp. 64 ff. ³ J. A. Robinson (1921), chaps. I, II.

⁴ See D. P. Kirby in *EHR*, LXXVIII (1963), 514-27, and references cited; W. Levison, 'Bede as Historian', in *Bede, his Life, Times and Writings*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford, 1935), pp. 111-51, esp. p. 130.

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from time to time as abbots came and went, and are as reliable as contemporary annals. Commonly, however, they were not kept up consistently, and gaps were left, or were filled from memory or conjecture; or by injudicious use of the monastic calendars. Thus the fourteenth-century list of the abbots of Furness seems to have been drawn at conjecture from a calendar or obituary, and its early sections contain duplications, or abbots (maybe) of other houses, or abbots of Furness of other centuries. The order of abbots is of almost no authority, and can never be accepted without other evidence. The abbatial list for Fountains in the fifteenth-century 'President Book', however, contains precise information of the years, months and days of each abbacy, and it has been shown that in the large majority of cases they are precisely right;¹ though only if one appreciates that the list works on two eccentric principles: that a month is not a calendar month but a period of 28 days, and that each reign is calculated from the previous abbot's death, as if no vacancies occurred. This list implies a warning: the author was evidently a mathematician of some competence who took pains to make his data consistent. The scribes of many lists were content to copy entries written at different times and on different assumptions; and they normally failed to check if the numbers they quoted added up correctly. Furness and Fountains represent the extremes: every list has to be judged on its own merits – its date, source, relation to other evidence, and to any indication one can find of its authors' access to sound materials.

A useful supplement to the evidence of annals and lists is provided by entries in calendars and obituaries. Occasionally they give years as well as days of death; but for the most part they give (in their nature) only months and days; since liturgical books were more readily discarded than chronicles and charters, they had less chance of survival and are, comparatively speaking, rare; and with bare names – especially for the late Saxon period or the early Norman when a handful of English or Scandinavian and French names made up the modest range of choice brought to the font – identification can be hazardous. But obits have one great advantage over entries of day and month of death in chronicles, and that is that they are less subject to the major vagaries of scribal error. Within a few days they can seldom be relied on to be precise: the lists in this book provide copious examples of obits recorded over the range of several days. The calendar, strictly speaking, recorded when a man was minded, not when he died; and liturgical convenience, space in the calendar, scribal care or the reverse dictated within limits where the name was placed. There are a few cases in which a bishop (for one reason or another) was commemorated at quite a different time of year from his death; but in these lists, out of very numerous

¹ See note on p. 132.

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cases in which we can check a calendar or the like against other evidence, there are only a handful of discrepancies of more than a few days, and these seem mostly due to scribal error – in the majority of cases in the chronicle. St Francis of Assisi died on 3 October 1226 – though towards midnight; but he was immediately, and universally, commemorated on 4 October. We can never assume, unless we have the most precise information (as in Francis's case) from other sources, that we know the exact day of a man's death; nor would medieval computations of midnight satisfy a modern chronologer. Nor again can we assume that entries in chronicles (where no scribal error has altered the month or changed 'ides' to 'nones') are more reliable than entries in calendars, since clearly the former were often based on the latter. The editors of this book have therefore felt that it was misleading to draw too sharp a distinction between evidence drawn from chronicles and obituaries, and have used the shorthand 'd.' = 'died', rather than some periphrasis, with calendar evidence;¹ this is one of many cases where the shorthand used in lists of this kind can itself mislead unless interpreted in the light of the type of evidence available.

For all its inequalities and the problems that it raises, the evidence of chronicles, annals, abbatial lists and other directly chronological materials provides the bone structure on which lists of this kind must be based. The most copious sources of names for these lists are charters, but between 1066 and 1200 charters are commonly undated, and twenty or thirty charters may not tell us as much as one soundly based annal. Episcopal charters were not commonly dated in the twelfth century; private charters seldom before the reign of Edward I, and not regularly until the time of Edward II. At the very end of our period royal writs and charters began to be regularly dated, and dated final concords first appeared and then became prolific. The early chancery rolls, early collections of fines, and the one bishop's 'register' – the roll of Hugh of Wells, bishop of Lincoln – to survive from our period, are a very fruitful source of precisely dated information for the closing decades. For the rest, the copious evidence of charters can only be used when the charters have been interpreted and dated.

These processes are full of hazards. Forgery was common in the twelfth century, and far from unknown in the centuries which followed.² Fortunately one may reasonably presume of the large majority of the charters used in this book that they are not in any ordinary sense forgeries. To use them for the present purpose, however, it is necessary also to assume, broadly speaking, that all the witnesses were alive when the transaction described took place; that a

¹ The alternative is the practice of the new Le Neve, of using the word 'commemorated': this is unobjectionable, although it may suggest a degree of scepticism not justified by the evidence, and would add somewhat to the length of entries in lists of monastic superiors where such evidence is copious.

² For a general survey, with bibliography, *GF*, chap. viii, see also Brooke in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, iii (1965–9), 377–86.

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man will be called ‘bone memorie’ when he is dead; ‘quondam’ when he has resigned his office; that whether he be earl or abbot or archdeacon, a man will be given his title if he has one, but cannot be given it before it was inherited or earned. On such assumptions one must work if charters are to be dated at all; but none of them is watertight. We rarely know what relation a twelfth-century charter bore to the transaction it described. It is a reasonable assumption that it was normally written very soon after, and when the symbolic act of a grant or the like took the form of laying a charter on the altar, the charter must already have been written. But there are cases, especially the monastic foundation charters studied by Professor Galbraith in a well-known article, in which ‘authentic’ charters were drawn up years after the event, with many anachronisms.¹ We have almost no information as to how witness lists were compiled: thirteenth-century evidence shows that witnesses did not necessarily have to be present at any stage in the transaction;² the formulas used in the twelfth century and the precision with which the witnesses to particular stages in a transaction are sometimes noted, suggest the normal assumption of physical presence. Even so, there is plenty of room for error – scribal error in later copies, and even from time to time errors made by scribes in originals. Unfortunately, charters were often written after the event, and always written with the idea that they would be read by posterity; thus a living pope may be called ‘beate memorie’,^{3*} a royal clerk who collected patronage might frequently witness royal charters without any reference to his archdeaconry – while his neighbour, also an habitual absentee, could be regularly given his title. When a charter was drawn up later than the event it described, anachronisms could enter in, and a man might appear to have received a title some years before the accepted date. Finally, in the early twelfth century, surprising though it seems, it has been shown⁴ that the title ‘comes’ was commonly left out even with men whose earldom was perfectly well recognized; and in Stephen’s reign, when the use of the title was becoming more stable, its tenure was often in dispute.

It is a delicate matter to balance the probabilities in using these criteria. Some must be ignored: the pious aim of a charter can be expressed as ‘pro salute anime’ of a donor’s family and overlords; or ‘pro anima’; no doubt there was a tendency to use the latter formula for the dead, the former for the living. The exceptions were too numerous for this criterion ever to be used.⁵ Similarly, the appearance or absence of ‘comes’ down to the death of Henry I gives no reliable guidance. On the other hand abuse of ‘bone memorie’ seems to have been rare;

¹ *Cambridge Historical Journal*, iv, iii (1934), 205–22, 296–8.

² See the well-known document quoted e.g. by J. C. Russell in *Speculum*, xv (1940), 492–3.

³ Innocent II is ‘beate memorie’ in an original of *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, ii, no. 1687 (CCXLVIII). Cf. Brooke in *EHR*, LXXII (1957), 690 where a later date for the text is suggested; but see P. Chaplais in *EHR*, LXXV (1960), 266, who shows it to be the work of a chancery scribe. See, however, *Reg.* iii, p. xiii and n.

⁴ By Sir Charles Clay, *EYC*, viii, pp. 46–7. ⁵ See idem, *EYC*, iv, pp. xxvii–xxx.