

CHAPTER I

THE ENDOWMENTS OF THE ABBEY

I. THE TEMPORALITIES

No Celtic twilight shrouds the beginnings of monastic life at Tavistock. The abbey was an Old English royal foundation, one of those established by king Edgar and his ministers in pursuance of their grand design for covering England with a network of Benedictine houses. It seems likely that political considerations had their part in this plan. The monasteries were indeed designed to be, above all, centres of piety and learning, but they were also to be landowners in close dependence on the Crown. As such, they would make for cohesion in the body politic. The unity of the English realm, so lately achieved, and still so liable to sudden fissure, needed every prop that statecraft could devise.

So far as Devon was concerned, the royal scheme was fulfilled in 968, when the old monastery at Exeter was revived under abbot Sideman. Cornwall, however, required special treatment. Its ecclesiastical traditions were of Celtic mould, and its monks had lived under a rule very different from that of St Benedict. With great prudence, therefore, the government determined that a new abbey, dedicated to Our Lady and the Cornish saint Rumon, should be established not in Cornwall itself but just across the Tamar, at a point directly in line with the main road from Bodmin and Liskeard.

Tavistock at this period lay within the royal hundred of Lifton. From a reference in Alfred the Great's will, and from later documents, it appears that a substantial portion of the king's demesne in Cornwall was attached to Lifton for administrative purposes, under an officer who bore the rank of high-reeve.¹ In 974 this important bailiwick was in the hands of Ordulf, the king's brother-in-law. To him therefore fell the task of supervising the beginnings of the new house. His also was the privilege of supplement-

¹ DA LXXVIII, 1946, pp. 268 sqq.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45371-5 - Tavistock Abbey: A Study in the Social and Economic History of Devon

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ing its endowments from his patrimonial estate. In later centuries the abbey was always, and justly, considered as a royal foundation; but the first place among its 'founders' in the monastic sense of the term, meaning its chief benefactors, was reserved for Ordulf, and the second for Ordulf's wife Ælfwynn.

By 981 the abbey was ready for its charter. This document was issued in the name of the boy-king Ethelred. Its effect was to confer upon Tavistock, as the seat of the abbey, the status of a privileged 'book-land'. Within its boundaries the abbot would enjoy seignorial rights previously vested in the king. The obligation of providing armed men in wartime and of contributing towards the upkeep of bridges and fortifications was not lifted, but from all other national burdens Tavistock was henceforth to be exempt. The abbey lands were to be held in perpetuity; on no account might they be sold, exchanged, or granted away.

A list of the original endowments is given in the narrative prefixed to the great register of Tavistock. It is evidently drawn from very ancient records, if indeed it is not transcribed directly from the charter of 981.¹ Twenty properties are named. Eight of them, namely Tavistock, Milton Abbot, Hatherleigh, Burrington, Romansleigh, Downeckney, Linkinhorn, and an unidentified estate which Dugdale read as "Chuelin," are ascribed to Ordulf. The others form a composite list, in which no distinction is made between the benefactions of Ordulf's wife and those attributable to other members or friends of the family. A group of four estates which heads this second list, namely Abbotsham, Worthygate, Orleigh, and Annery, may safely be ascribed to Ælfwynn, for they are all in the vicinity of Alwington, that is, Ælfwynn's *tun*, a village in the far north of Devon which bears her name. Three others, Colebrook, Leigh, and Woolston, cannot be identified with certainty, for their names are shared by several places in Devon and Cornwall. Thornbury and Panson lay in the hundred of Black Torrington. Shevioc and Rame on the south coast, and Stoke Climsland on the Tamar, were important Cornish manors.

The same narrative refers to a special voluntary contribution made by Ælfmær, abbot of Tavistock, towards the Danegeld levied in 994. The abbot is said to have given "a pound and a half

¹ See Appendix B, p. 280.

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by weight for his demesne lands in Devonshire: to wit, 21 man-cuses for Tavistock, as much again for Hecfelda and Burrington, and 60 pence by weight for Thornbury.”¹ This passage has several points of interest. For one thing it seems to bear out the statement in the so-called Laws of Edward the Confessor, that ecclesiastical demesnes were not originally charged with Danegeld. Had they been liable, there would have been no special merit in Ælfmær’s contribution.² Then again, it seems unlikely that he would have paid anything for Heathfield, the waste land to the north of Tavistock: yet no other “Hecfelda” or “Hetfelda” is named in connection with the abbey. Finally, why was nothing paid for Abbotsham or Hatherleigh, to name but two of the other Devon manors? Here the answer may well be that Ordulf had reserved a life-interest in some of the property. He is known to have lived until 1005, and the language of Ethelred’s charter—“concessa sunt vel concedenda”—hints at some form of posthumous benefaction.³

In 997 the abbey was burnt down by Danish raiders.⁴ This seems to have had no more than a passing effect on its fortunes. Lyfing, who was abbot until 1027, raised it to a new height of prosperity. His benefactions are described by William of Malmesbury as “multa et spectabilia”, but no particulars are given.⁵ It was probably during his term of office that the unfortunate prince Eadwig, younger brother of Edmund Ironside, earned for himself a place in the list of founders. Exiled by Cnut’s order soon after his exclusion from the throne, he wandered restlessly by sea and land; then, falling sick, crept back to lay his bones at Tavistock, bequeathing to the monastery, as a last gift, his manor of Plymstock.⁶

¹ Dugdale, II, p. 495.

² The passage is not one of those examined by Round in his discussion of the subject (*Domesday Studies*, I, pp. 92 sqq.).

³ In the same way his contemporary Æthelmær, the founder of Cerne Abbey, gives the township of Cerne “postquam ego . . . hoc saeculum relinquam” (K 656*).

⁴ *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ed. Plummer, I, p. 131.

⁵ *Gesta Pontificum*, p. 201.

⁶ Florence of Worcester gives a different account of Eadwig’s fate, and has been followed by most historians; but reference should be made to Freeman’s criticism (*Norman Conquest*, I, p. 700) and to DA LXXVIII, 1946, pp. 265, 266.

On Lyfing's promotion to the see of Crediton he was succeeded by Ealdred, the future archbishop of York. Ealdred's abbacy lasted from 1027 until 1042 or the following year, when he received episcopal consecration, apparently in order that he might act as Lyfing's coadjutor in the diocese of Worcester, which Lyfing now held in plurality with Crediton.¹ The post of coadjutor bishop was unendowed, and provision seems to have been made for Ealdred at the expense of the monastery he was leaving. Two manors, Denbury and Coffinswell, of which we now hear for the first time, remained in his possession until 1066 and probably until his death in 1069, after which they reverted to the abbey.²

Lyfing and Ealdred were among the foremost statesmen of their time. Ruled by such men, the house could scarcely fail to prosper. Sihtric, the next abbot, was not their equal, but he was a forceful character, and energetic in promoting the interests of his monastery. This was the more necessary because under the house of Godwin no churchman's property was safe. Godwin's daughter Edith became queen in 1045, and Lifton hundred, with its Cornish appurtenances, was settled on her for her lifetime. It was administered by a certain Ordgar, a descendant it would seem of Ordulf and Ælfwynn. On one occasion Ordgar freed a number of slaves in the vicinity of Tavistock, including one from Stoke Climsland, a manor which, as we have seen, had formerly belonged to the abbey.³

Ordgar left a son named Ordulf, living in 1066, at which date he appears in Domesday Book as lord of nineteen manors in Devon, two in Cornwall, and one in Somerset. A man of great strength and gigantic stature, Ordulf was also passionately fond of the chase. One of his favourite hunting-grounds was Horton, in east Dorset, where a small monastery, of recent foundation, attracted his notice and secured some benefactions from him. It is said that he expressed a wish to be buried there; but one day, while hunting upon Dartmoor, he lost his way and perished of exposure. After this it was inevitable that his body, when found, should be interred at Tavistock beside his ancestors. In accordance with the custom of the age, Ordulf had assigned one of his

¹ K 772, 784, 912, 916.

² DB IV, pp. 166, 167. For a similar transaction later in Ealdred's career, see William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. xxviii, 19, 20.

³ DA LXXVIII, 1946, pp. 271, 272.

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manors for a 'soul-scot' or gift to the church in which he should be buried; and of this manor abbot Sihtric now took possession. It was Antony, in Cornwall, a desirable acquisition both for its own sake and as adjoining the lands given by Ordulf's forebears in Shevioc and Rame. In the course of the Domesday inquest the abbot of Horton put in a claim to Antony, but failed to convince the royal commissioners.¹

At the beginning of 1066 the abbey held lands in three counties, assessed for Danegeld as follows.

DEVON		hides	virgates
Tauestocha	Tavistock	3	2
Mideltona	Milton Abbot		2
Lideltona	Liddaton in Brentor		2
Hadreleia	Hatherleigh	3	0
Tornebiria	Thornbury	1	0
Hama	Abbotsham	2	0
Wrdieta	Worthygate in Parkham		2
Bernintona	Burrington	3	0
Liega	Romansleigh	1	0
Hundatora	Houndtor in Manaton		2
Plemestocha	Plymstock		2
		16	0

CORNWALL		hides	virgates
Savioch	Shevioc	1	0
Rame	Rame		2
Tregrenon	Trewornan in St Minver		2
Pennehalgar	Penharget in St Ive ²		$\frac{1}{2}$
Talgar	Tolcarne in North Hill		$\frac{1}{2}$
Treiswandel	Trewanta in Lewannick		$\frac{1}{4}$
Heli	Illand in North Hill		$\frac{1}{4}$
Trenuwit	Trenowth	2	0
		4	$1\frac{1}{2}$

¹ This account of the transaction rests upon a combination of evidence derived from William of Malmesbury (*op. cit.*, p. 203), the Exon Domesday, and oral tradition first written down in the seventeenth century. It is more fully discussed in DA LXXVIII, 1946, pp. 272 sqq.

² Not Penhawger in Menheniot, as stated in VCH *Cornwall*, II, p. 67. In 1306 it was referred to as "Chirleton" (FA p. 206); and Chirleton, now Charaton, was a tithing in the parish of St Ive which included Penharget (DCNQ XXIII, 1948, p. 202).

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DORSET		hides	virgates
Oscherwille	Askerswell	3	o
Powrtone	Poorton	2	o
		5	o
Total 25h. iv. 2f. ¹			

To the Devonshire list must be added a small property at Way in Bridestowe;² Orleigh, which was not a manor, and therefore does not appear in Domesday Book; and Annery, which was attached to Worthygate.³ In Cornwall, Illand and Trewanta had been purchased by abbot Sihtric, who had also bought up the reversion of two virgates in Boyton and two in Tribicen *alias* Trebihan (Trebeigh in St Ive).⁴ We have seen that Antony, another manor rated at two virgates, was acquired soon afterwards.

It is evident that notwithstanding the clause in Ethelred's charter forbidding alienation, a number of the original estates had been sold, exchanged, or lost. By 1066 Leigh, Panson, Colebrook, Downeckney, Linkinhorn, and Woolston were in other hands; no more is heard of "Chuelin"; Stoke Climsland now belonged to Harold. Harold, like his father Godwin, is known to have enriched himself at the expense of many churches. There is no direct record of his despoiling Tavistock, but it is hardly probable that after snatching Topsham from the bishop of Exeter, and land at "Tretдено" in Cornwall from the canons of St Petroc, he would have been content to leave Tavistock unscathed.

To the countess Gytha, Harold's mother, such encroachments were a cause of acute distress. Gytha was an intensely pious woman. On one occasion she refused to eat food grown on land which had been taken from a monastery. After the battle of Hastings she came down to Exeter, anxious no doubt to undo, so far as possible, the misdeeds of a son who had come to so disastrous an end in this world, and to secure prayers for his salvation in the next. At some date between October 1066 and the capitulation of

¹ DB iv, pp. 163-8, 38, 39; i, p. 78 c.

² *Ibid.*, iv, p. 265. ³ Reichel, *Hundreds of Devon*, p. 578.

⁴ They were however assessed at 1 virgate and 1 ferling respectively. Sihtric's purchase of Boyton and Trebeigh is recorded in the list of *Terrae Occupatae*, but the Exon Domesday names Alnothus and Osulf as in possession TRE. It may be inferred that what Sihtric bought was a reversionary interest. For the identification of Heli with the Elent of the *Terrae Occupatae*, and of both with Illand, see DCNQ xxii, 1942, p. 95.

Exeter in the early spring of 1068, she conveyed to abbot Sihtric her large estate of Werrington, consisting of approximately nineteen square miles in the Cornish hundred of Stratton and seven in Black Torrington hundred, on the Devonshire side of the Tamar. The political situation being what it was, any sort of traffic with a member of the fallen dynasty involved some measure of risk; but if, as has been suggested here, the abbot had a good claim for restitution of property seized by Harold, he might feel reasonably safe in accepting such compensation as Gytha had it in her power to offer.

In point of fact, no one demurred to the transaction. Sihtric remained in undisputed possession of the manor until his death in 1082. He seems often to have had surplus funds at his disposal, and to have employed them in buying out impoverished thegns. By this means he acquired Leigh and Liddaton in the neighbourhood of Tavistock, and enlarged his property at Burrington by adding to it Northcote and some land in the adjacent parish of Roborough.¹ The purchase of a virgate at Raddon, near Thorverton, gave him a foothold in east Devon. By lending money to a burgess of the cathedral city, and taking a mortgage on the borrower's house, he acquired a residence in Exeter. Irresponsible gossip, repeated in the next generation by William of Malmesbury, accused him of piracy.² The fact behind this accusation may be that he accomplished some successful police-work at the expense of the Channel pirates. As lord of Sheviock and Rame he was particularly well placed for keeping watch over the Tamar estuary, and more than one churchman at this period undertook a special responsibility for coastal defence. It is an undoubted fact that the Scilly islands, a favourite haunt of searovers, presently became the seat of a dependent priory colonized from Tavistock.³

¹ DCNQ xxiii, 1948, p. 241. Leigh, in Milton Abbot, may have been the "Lege" of the original endowment (*ante*, p. 2). In 1066 it is said, like Panson, to have been in other hands; but is it quite certain that the Domesday jurors, after a lapse of twenty years, never mistook an undertenant for the owner?

² *Gesta Pontificum*, p. 204.

³ See below, p. 15. It was the abbot of St Benet's, Holme, who watched over the East Anglian coast (Freeman, *op. cit.*, III, p. 717). In later centuries the abbot of Tavistock was more than once called upon to guard the south coast, e.g. in 1377, 1383, and 1404 (CCR 1374-7, p. 497; 1381-5, p. 270;

These activities of its last English abbot gave Tavistock, for the first few years after the Norman Conquest, a delusive appearance of prosperity. But the impact of the conquest was to be not less disastrous for having been delayed. The Norman magnates, whenever they could find a pretext, enriched themselves at the expense of the house. Baldwin, sheriff of Devon, took the small property at Way. The Conqueror's half-brother, Robert, count of Mortain, helped himself to Boyton, Trebeigh, Illand, and Trewanta. He also acquired Trenowth, but as nothing is said of usurpation here, we must either postulate an omission in the record or suppose this large and valuable manor to have changed hands by legitimate means.

Far more serious were the losses due to the introduction of knight service. It is generally agreed that when the Conqueror exacted military service from bishoprics and abbeys, as he did in 1070 or soon after, he introduced a new principle of tenure. There had been military tenants of a sort before the conquest, such as the four thegns who in 1066 were settled at Tavistock, holding between them a considerable portion of the manor. But the Normans who took their place represented feudalism fully fledged. Unfortunately for Tavistock, there was no other monastic house in the peninsula sufficiently well endowed to support the burden. Perhaps for that reason a disproportionately heavy quota was exacted from the abbot of Tavistock, who was called upon to maintain fifteen knights, while St Albans, a vastly richer house, provided only six.¹ It is probable that Sihtric, like some

CPR 1401-5, p. 353). The Cornu family, successors in title to one of the Domesday knights, held the inland manor of Thornbury on the express condition of coming with the lord abbot to defend the coast whenever called upon to do so.

¹ Professor Stenton considers that "the theory of a political discrimination between one abbey and another becomes less probable the more closely it is examined" (*Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 627). Professor Knowles thinks the assessment was based on the actual number of men-at-arms retained at the moment (*The Monastic Order in England*, p. 610); in which case Tavistock may have suffered from Sihtric's patriotic zeal. After the destructive raid on the south Devon coast which the sons of Harold carried out in 1069, he may well have kept on foot an exceptionally strong defensive force. While agreeing with Professor Knowles in his explanation of the assessment, I have given reasons elsewhere for believing that he attaches too much importance to Malmesbury's gossip about Sihtric (EHR LVIII, 1943, p. 195). It is possible that the chronicler picked up some tale of piracy at Sherborne Abbey, to which Horton was annexed c. 1118. No doubt the loss of Antony

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other churchmen in the same plight, contented himself with hiring mercenaries, for in later documents the organization of the Tavistock knight service in its permanent form is always credited to Geoffrey, the first Norman abbot (1082–8).¹ By 1086 territorial endowments had been carved out of the abbey lands for most if not all of its fifteen knights. The picture of these holdings given in the Exon Domesday may be summarized as follows.

KNIGHT	FIEFS	VALUE IN 1086 ²
Ermenald	Sheviock, Antony, Rame, Tre- wornan, Tolcarne, Penharget; $\frac{1}{2}$ virgate in Tavistock	£12 3 4
Ralph	Thornbury; $\frac{1}{2}$ virgate in Hather- leigh; $\frac{1}{2}$ virgate in Tavistock	3 15 10
Hugo	$\frac{1}{2}$ hide $\frac{1}{3}$ virgate 1 ferling in and near Tavistock	2 1 8
Robert	1 virgate 2 ferlings in Tavistock; 1 virgate 1 $\frac{1}{6}$ ferlings in Romans- leigh	1 19 7
Ralph de Tilio	$\frac{3}{4}$ virgate in Tavistock	12 6
Geoffrey	1 ferling in Tavistock; $\frac{1}{2}$ virgate $\frac{1}{2}$ ferling in Hatherleigh; 1 virgate in Burrington; Liddaton	2 18 6 $\frac{1}{2}$
Nigel	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ferlings in Hatherleigh; 2 vir- gates 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ ferlings in Romansleigh	1 11 0 $\frac{1}{2}$
Grento	Coffinswell (2 hides)	4 0 0
Walter ³	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ virgates in Hatherleigh	1 17 6
Rainald ³	Houndtor ($\frac{1}{2}$ hide)	1 0 0
		£32 0 0

still rankled. But all that is certainly known about Sihtric in his later years, apart from his acquisition of Werrington, is that on Whitsunday 1068 he attended Queen Matilda's coronation at Westminster, and that he died on the 6th of April 1082, still in possession of his abbacy (Davis, *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, p. 6, no. 22; Bodleian MS. Digby 81, fo. 86).

¹ ETC VI, VII, XII.

² Domesday Book sometimes gives only a collective valuation, as when the six fiefs in Tavistock are said to be worth 100s. all told. In such cases the value of each one has been computed by treating its geld assessment as an index of proportionate value. On this reckoning a ferling was worth 4s. 2d. at Tavistock, 3s. 9d. at Hatherleigh, and 2s. 6d. at Romansleigh.

³ Not expressly named as a military tenant. Walter's is the largest fief in Hatherleigh, and may therefore be identified with Broomford (see below, p. 13). In subsequent lists Broomford and Houndtor both appear as knights' fees, as also does Liddaton, which Geoffrey is described as holding "of the abbot's demesne".

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It is known from later records that some of these fiefs were expected to provide for more than one knight. Ermenald's, for instance, was always reckoned as four knights' fees.¹ In all probability, therefore, the ten military tenants named in Domesday Book accounted between them for the whole service of fifteen knights.

It was a cardinal principle of the Domesday inquest that no transfer of land effected since the death of Edward the Confessor should be recognized as valid unless the holder could produce a charter from king William or show that he had been put in possession by the Norman sheriff. Under this rule all the lands that Sihtric had acquired after 1066 were liable to forfeiture. Northcote, Liddaton, Leigh, and Antony were saved by their conversion into knights' fees. Raddon was leased off to William, the king's usher, and the land in Roborough, near Burrington, to a still more powerful magnate, William Capra.² Only Werrington remained in hand; and a brief note in the Exon Domesday shows how the Domesday commissioners dealt with it. "The abbot's predecessor held this manor, and the abbot was seised of it when king William sent his barons to inquire into the lands of England. He was disseised by them because the English testified that it did not belong to the abbey on the day king Edward was alive and dead."³ As Werrington had belonged to Gytha, it was turned over to the sheriff Baldwin, who farmed all that remained of her property in Devon. He forthwith annexed the manor to his own shire, thereby depriving Cornwall of some nineteen square miles and creating an anomalous boundary which has puzzled map-makers ever since.⁴

Werrington was valued at twenty pounds a year. The forfeiture of this great manor, and the usurpation of the Norman mag-

¹ Or, what comes to the same thing, six and a half 'small fees of Mortain' (*Testa de Nevill*, p. 394).

² These were civilian tenures. The annual value of Raddon was 5s.; that of Roborough 20s. In the twelfth century Raddon was held of the abbot by the Fitz-Ralphs at a yearly rent of 2s. and a wax candle weighing three pounds (ETC xi).

³ DB iv, p. 165. But for this note in the Exon Domesday we should know nothing of Sihtric's transaction with Gytha. The Exchequer Domesday gives no hint of it. How many other changes of ownership lie concealed under the terse formulas of the official record?

⁴ Finberg, 'The Early History of Werrington', EHR LIX, 1944, pp. 237 sqq.