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

H. P. R. Finberg

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN
MEDIEVAL LIFE AND THOUGHT

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University of Cambridge*

NEW SERIES VOL. 2

TAVISTOCK ABBEY

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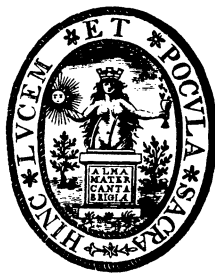
TAVISTOCK ABBEY

A STUDY IN THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF DEVON

BY

H. P. R. FINBERG

M.A., F.R.Hist.S.



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1951

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107453715

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First published 1951

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-45371-5 Paperback

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PREFACE

THE region with which this book is concerned has been strangely neglected by historians. Devonshire is the third largest county in England, and it is also one in which old habits tend to persist, sometimes for generations after they have been modified or given up in less conservative shires. Hence it abounds in subject-matter of historic interest. Yet until recently very little had been done to elucidate the character and chronology of its early occupation by the men of Wessex; and archaeology has yet to reveal what sort of life the Britons of Dumnonia were leading when the English colonists first moved into their midst. The prehistoric mining industry of Cornwall has attracted much attention: the mining records of Devon remain virtually unexplored. No monograph has been written on the cloth trade of the peninsula; and as for agriculture, all that current textbooks have to say about it is that the open-field system was not practised in this part of England: a statement which turns out to be demonstrably incorrect.

It is clear that sooner or later Devonshire will have to be fitted into the mosaic of English social history. In the following pages an attempt is made to supply one or two of the missing fragments. I have called the book a study in the social and economic history of Devon, because it deals less with the monastic life as such than with the agrarian, industrial, and administrative life of that part of Devon in which the estates of Tavistock Abbey lay. A Benedictine community is primarily a body of men devoted to a life of prayer; and the daily round of liturgical offices in the choir of the abbey church is apt to leave few traces in the records. As a rule we hear about it only when the monks excite remark by neglecting their essential function. But regarded from the outside as an economic unit, a property-owning corporation, a producer and consumer, every great abbey provides material for social history; and the further we look back into the so-called middle ages, the greater importance does that material assume.

It must be confessed at the outset that the present study

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labours under severe limitations. The period of nearly three hundred years that elapsed between the English occupation of Devon and the foundation of Tavistock Abbey can receive only superficial treatment. Further, most of the estates with which this book deals lay in the western half of the county; and they have to be studied by the light of records which are not by any means complete. The great register of the abbey, from which Dugdale printed some important excerpts, vanished in the eighteenth century. If the monks of Tavistock ever wrote a chronicle of their house or drew up a custumal of their manors, these too have disappeared. No extant court roll, and only one account roll, precedes in date the fourteenth century.

On the other hand, the abbey was an ancient royal foundation, established nearly a hundred years before the Norman Conquest. It was the richest monastic house in Devon, and the only one that held its lands in chief of the Crown by knight service. Its economic interests embraced fisheries, mines, fairs, markets, and agriculture. From the twelfth century onwards the borough outside its gates was directly involved in the tin-mining industry of Dartmoor; and later it became an important centre of the cloth trade. Altogether it would not be easy to find an institution more closely linked with the economic activities of its neighbourhood.

Moreover, the available materials, though deficient in the respects noted above, are far from scanty. Some account of them is given at the end of the book. Here it is enough to say that the public records, printed and unprinted, especially Domesday Book, the Pipe Rolls, and the Rolls Patent and Close, provide the background for information extracted from such documents as the episcopal registers of the diocese of Exeter, and above all from that portion of the abbey muniments which passed at the Dissolution into the hands of John, Lord Russell, and now belongs to his descendant the duke of Bedford. The collection includes a small cartulary that forms an invaluable bridge between Domesday Book and the later records. There are also court rolls of several manors; over a hundred and fifty account rolls; originals or transcripts of a dozen manorial 'extents'; and more than a thousand classified deeds, ranging in date from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, many of them executed by persons of quite modest station.

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Like most great monastic houses, the Abbey of Our Lady and St Rumon of Tavistock was endowed partly with ecclesiastical benefices and partly with territorial estates. It will be advisable to begin with a short history of this aggregate, describing the gradual accumulation of churches and manors, the fluctuations of loss and gain, the slow recovery from the impact of the Norman Conquest. Next, the physical background will require examination. Here the eighteen square miles of the ancient parish of Tavistock will serve as a microscopic specimen of the agrarian landscape. Taking account of the evidence from place-names, an endeavour will be made to reconstruct the pattern of settlement in this part of England. Turning then from the soil to the tillers of the soil, we shall inquire into the condition of the serfs and the free peasants before and after Domesday. These investigations will pave the way for a detailed study of the arable and pastoral husbandry practised by the monks of Tavistock on their demesne lands. The subject of sheepfarming will lead on naturally to the trade in woollen cloths; and having now set foot in the industrial field we shall not leave it without paying some attention to the other great local industry, tin-mining. Other sources of revenue, such as markets, fisheries, and courts, will claim their share of notice; after which a chapter on the management of the estates will gather up all these threads, enabling us to see how the abbey made the most of its resources, or at times failed to do so, in the effort, renewed from century to century against varying obstacles, to discharge its obligations to the public and to its own community. By way of epilogue, the story will be continued for a few years beyond the Dissolution.

It will be obvious to every reader how deeply I am indebted to the duke of Bedford for the generosity with which he allowed me access to his muniments. Without this privilege the book could never have been written. A labour of research prolonged over several years has been rendered easy and pleasant by the courtesy and active goodwill of the staff of the Bedford estate offices at Woburn, Bloomsbury, and Tavistock, particularly Mrs A. M. Osborne Samuel, Mr W. Corbett, Mr T. S. Bliss, Mr W. M. Finnie, Mr R. G. Chapman, and Mr F. T. Nowell. I have to thank Mr G. F. Kingston, head of the agricultural department,

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Seale-Hayne College, Newton Abbot, for his care in reading and commenting upon the manuscript of Chapters IV and V; the Rev. M. D. Knowles, Litt.D., F.B.A., F.S.A., professor of medieval history in the University of Cambridge, for criticism and advice on the manuscript as a whole; and the Leverhulme Trustees for a contribution towards the expenses of research. Others who have kindly assisted in various ways are the president of St John's College, Oxford (Dr A. L. Poole), the provost of Oriel (Professor G. N. Clark), Mrs M. C. S. Cruwys, Miss Cecily Radford, the Rev. W. M. M. Picken, Professor M. M. Postan, Messrs G. J. Abell, J.P., John Benson, Eric V. Kingdon, Hugh A. Lomas, Edward Miller, and R. Hansford Worth. To my wife, and to my friend Dr W. G. Hoskins, I am especially grateful for their constant encouragement and the invaluable help they have given at every stage of the work.

H. P. R. F.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BM	British Museum
CCR	<i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i>
CFR	<i>Calendar of Fine Rolls</i>
CPR	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
DA	<i>Devonshire Association, Transactions of the</i>
DB	<i>Domesday Book</i>
DCNQ	<i>Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries</i>
Dugdale	Dugdale's <i>Monasticon Anglicanum</i> (1817–30)
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
ETC	'Some Early Tavistock Charters' (EHR LXII)
FA	<i>Feudal Aids, Inquisitions and Assessments relating to</i>
K	Kemble, <i>Codex Diplomaticus</i>
L & P	<i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic</i>
n. s.	New Series
Oliver	Oliver's <i>Monasticon Dioecesis Exoniensis</i>
PND	<i>The Place-Names of Devon</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
PRS	Pipe Roll Society
Reg.	<i>Episcopal Register</i>
TPR	<i>Calendar of the Tavistock Parish Records</i>
VCH	<i>Victoria County History</i>
W	Woburn Abbey muniments