1
Foundation and growth

The foundation at Runcorn

The Augustinian priory was originally founded at Runcorn in 1115 by the second baron of Halton, William fitz Nigel. Following the Norman conquest the earldom of Chester had been created, encompassing an area as large as the later county of Chester, but also controlling an area to the west of the Dee as far as the River Clwyd, and another area north of the Mersey as far as the River Ribble. Within his domain, the earl of Chester created eight barons whose principal manors were at Halton (Nigel), Malpas (Robert fitz Hugh), Mold (Robert of Montalt), Rhuddlan (Robert of Rhuddlan), Malbank or Nantwich (William Malbank), Kinderton Shipbrook (Richard Vernon), Dunham Massey (Hamon de Mascy) and Stockport (Gilbert de Venables) (Husain 1973, 112). Nigel and his successors were styled constable of Chester. As such they were second in command to the earl, and were charged with the duty of assembling his army when occasion demanded – usually for warfare in Wales.

The first earl of Chester, Hugh of Avranches, who was a nephew of King William, was responsible for the foundation of the first religious house within the earldom. A college of secular canons dedicated to St Werburgh had been established by Queen Aethelflaed in Chester in 907. Hugh refounded it as a Benedictine monastery. Anselm, abbot of Bec in Normandy, advised Hugh on the foundation and appointed one of his monks as the first abbot. The existing canons continued to hold their offices (Tait 1920, xxiv and 38). Hugh's monastery was therefore the successor of an existing institution, and he had a simple task in providing an endowment by granting the extensive possessions of the college, such as the valuable manors of Saighton, Ince and Sutton, to the new abbey (listed in Burne 1962, 196). To this were added various lesser grants from Hugh and others in the earldom, including William fitz Nigel (*ibid.*, 197–201).

Hugh's motive in founding a monastery seems to have been the usual concern of a medieval magnate for his soul. The opportunity of founding a religious house whose inmates would be bound to pray for the eternal salvation of the founder's soul, and the souls of his family, was taken by many men of Hugh's rank. According to Eadmer's *Life of St Anselm*, the reason for the bishop's visit to Chester in 1092 was that Hugh was seriously ill (Burne 1962, 4). In the following year the abbey was founded, although in fact Hugh continued to live until 1101.

Twenty-one years later Runcorn Priory was founded, the second religious house in the earldom. The foundation charter (Tait 1939) makes it clear that once again a prominent churchman (Robert de Limesey, bishop of Chester) played an important part in persuading the founder. Again, the principal motive was one of spiritual survival, although appropriately William fitz Nigel included a charity obligation to the earl as well as himself and his family in the charter: 'for the salvation of the soul of Earl Hugh and of Earl Richard and of myself and my wife, and of my father and mother, my sons and daughters, my brothers and sisters, and all my ancestors and posterity' (Tait 1939, 22).

Another similarity between the two foundations is that, as at Chester, where an existing church formed the basis of a new monastery dedicated to a Saxon saint, Runcorn Priory was dedicated to the Saxon St Bertelin and in all probability was based on an existing church. Runcorn had been established as a burgh (a fortified stronghold) by Aethelflaed, Queen of the Mercians, in 915 according to the Mercian Register (Whitelock 1965, 64). Bertelin is a rather obscure saint, but he seems to have had connections in the Mercian heartland of Staffordshire. The only other known dedication to Bertelin is the church of Barthomley on the Cheshire–Staffordshire border. The reputed chapel of St Bertelin was excavated in 1954 to the west of the parish church of St Mary, Stafford – the town he is said to have founded.

In adapting an existing church as the basis for an Augustinian priory, Runcorn was by no means unique. Twenty Augustinian houses were based on previous collegiate establishments (Robinson 1980, 35–6). Robinson, following Dickinson 1950, considered the number founded at pre-existing parish churches as considerable (Robinson, 41). However, most of the evidence presented for this is circumstantial. The view that post-Dissolution use of a monastic church indicates that there was a church there when the monastery was founded is questionable. The case of Runcorn seems, on the basis of the dedication, a much more likely candidate than most.

Augustinian canons

It is interesting that William fitz Nigel chose the Augustinian order for his religious house, unlike the earl of

Chester who had chosen the Benedictines. The choice available to Hugh d'Avranches was limited to the Benedictines and the order which comprised the community of Cluny (introduced at Lewes in 1077). By the time that William fitz Nigel was contemplating the foundation of a religious house, the choice had been widened by the introduction into England of the canons regular of St Augustine. The development of the Rule, and its adoption by colleges of secular canons, was encouraged by the Gregorian reform movement. During the eleventh century it spread across much of Europe. It has been established that the first house of regular canons in England to adopt the Rule in the full Augustinian sense was Colchester, in 1104 or shortly afterwards (Dickinson 1950, 108). However, even during the medieval period, there was no certainty as to which Augustinian house had the distinction of being able to assert that it was 'first of the places of its order founded in England' – those words were used by Holy Trinity Aldgate (London) in a petition of 1451–2 to be granted Mitred Abbey status (*Cal. Papal Reg.* 10, 106, discussed in Greene 1979, 105). The foundation of Aldgate has in fact been dated to 1107, and another house that might have disputed Aldgate's claim is Huntingdon (Cambs.), founded shortly before 1108 (Dickinson 1950). Other early houses were Llanthony (Powys), founded soon after 1108, Barnwell (Cambs.), founded in 1112, Hexham (Northumberland) and Bridlington (Yorks.), both founded in 1113, and Merton (Surrey) and Nostell (Yorks.), 1114. Runcorn's foundation in 1115 therefore places it in the pioneer class of Augustinian priories. Eventually there were about two hundred Augustinian foundations in England – more than those of any other order (fig. 5).

William fitz Nigel's selection of the Augustinian order a little over a decade after its introduction, when there were still only ten or so Augustinian priories in England, shows that he was well informed as to developments in this field. The influence of two people can be detected in his choice. One was Robert de Limesey, bishop of Chester, whom the foundation charter specifically mentions as advising William fitz Nigel. Robert may have seen the Augustinian order as being particularly worthy of his support in that the inmates of Runcorn Priory, as canons, were subject to episcopal supervision (as the status of priory itself implied). Other bishops also encouraged the adoption of the Augustinian Rule, most notably Bishop Malachy who introduced it to Ireland as a means of bringing within reformed Latin practice clerks in holy orders and married priests.

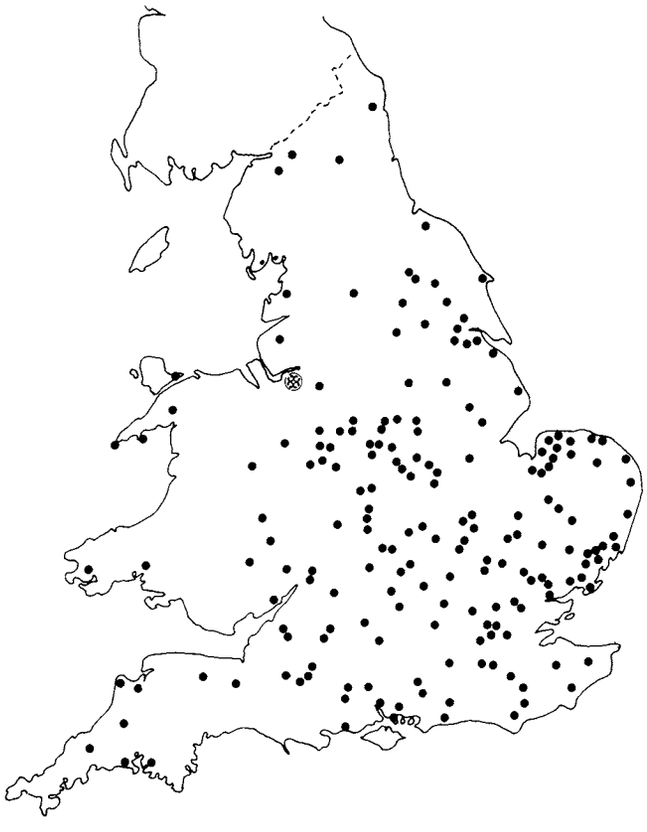
The other person who may have influenced William fitz Nigel's choice was his cousin Walter de Gant. He had founded Bridlington Priory in 1113 (Farrer 1915, 2, 445) and of particular significance is the fact that William fitz Nigel was one of the benefactors of Bridlington, having given to it the church of Flamborough (Farrer 1915, 2, 193). Both Tait and Dickinson have suggested that the first canons to occupy Runcorn Priory came from Bridlington (Tait 1939, 22; Dickinson 1950, 124) though the number that moved to Cheshire must have been small as Bridlington itself had so recently been established.

The status of William fitz Nigel – baron of Halton, and constable of Chester – accords well with the pattern of foundation of other Augustinian houses before 1135. Dickinson has shown that over seventy-five per cent of foundations in the early period were established by Henry I, officials of his court, or members of the royal entourage (Dickinson 1950, 129). William was not a member of that group, but as an important figure in the earldom of Chester, with extensive land holdings in many parts of England, he was certainly well able to provide his priory with an adequate endowment.

The move from Runcorn and foundation at Norton

The foundation charter of Norton Priory (Beamont 1873, 148–9; Ormerod 1882, 1, 691; both drawing on Leycester 1666) makes no mention of why, after nineteen years at Runcorn, the canons were transferred to Norton. The charter simply states that the move was made 'at the request and at the advice of Roger, bishop of Chester, and by the advice of my own people'. Two explanations can be

Fig. 5. Augustinian foundations in England and Wales. The location of Norton Priory is indicated by the cross symbol in north west England – a region with relatively few other Augustinian houses.



suggested. The first is that William fitz William, the founder's son and successor as baron of Halton, may have considered his father's alienation of the township of Runcorn a mistake for strategic reasons (Tait 1939, 14). The township was situated on the south bank of the River Mersey, where outcrops of sandstone on both banks narrow the river to form the Runcorn Gap. This was the only practical crossing point between Birkenhead at the mouth of the river, and Warrington further upriver, because elsewhere the Mersey was not only very wide, but it was also flanked by extensive marshland. Use of the Gap to control shipping on the Mersey was probably the reason for Aethelflaed's choice of the southern side for her burgh. The activities of the duke of Bridgewater, who removed the end of the promontory, the London Midland Railway Company, which used the promontory for constructing their railway bridge support, and finally the Manchester Ship Canal Company, which cut through the remainder of the promontory, have destroyed the remains of the burgh. Nonetheless, it is certain from various descriptions (such as Beamont 1873, 4) that this is where the burgh was situated. William fitz William may have considered it advisable to have this important point under his direct control.

The second explanation for the move to Norton is that the canons may have been influenced by the ascetic ideal of the Cistercian order. The similarly inclined Order of Savigny (amalgamated with the Cistercians in 1147) had founded their first English house at Tulketh near Preston (Lancs.) in 1123, moving to become the important abbey of Furness in 1127. Waverley, the first Cistercian house in England, was founded in 1128 (Brakspear 1905, 3) and the order spread rapidly – both Rievaulx and Fountains were established in 1132. By the time of Norton's foundation in 1134, the Cistercian emphasis on solitude of their communities for the greater sanctification of their members was becoming well known and admired. There was in any case an element within the Augustinian order that sought seclusion, exemplified most notably by Llanthony, which was established in a remote valley on the edge of the Black Mountains on the basis of an existing group of hermits (Craster 1963). When the canons of Runcorn moved, they left an established settlement for a part of Norton township that was one kilometre from the village of Norton and which archaeology and the evidence of plant remains have shown was a virgin site. A parallel can be drawn with the canons of Portchester, who moved away from their church so uncomfortably near a castle to the more tranquil setting of Southwick.

Twenty-one Augustinian houses changed sites, for a variety of reasons (Robinson 1980, 365). The moves usually involved only a modest distance, averaging 6 kilometres (3.7 miles) compared to the much larger average move for a Cistercian house of 29 kilometres (18 miles) (*ibid.*, 78). The move from Runcorn to Norton was only 4 kilometres.

The endowment of Runcorn (and subsequently Norton) Priory

In endowing a monastic house at its foundation, the intention of the donor was to provide capital assets and forms of income that would be sufficient to pay for the construction of the buildings, and to cover the running expenses. In the period before 1135 fifty-four Augustinian houses were established. Most had prominent founders who were able to provide substantial endowments. It is usually assumed, although direct evidence is in most cases lacking, that the minimum complement was twelve canons and a prior. In the case of the Cistercian order the minimum of thirteen undoubtedly applied, for it was specified in the Rule.

The endowment can be divided into two classes of assets, spiritual and temporal. Spiritualities included income derived from churches, which might provide pensions, gifts at shrines, burial gifts etc., and if the church was appropriated the rectorial tithes and often income from glebeland as well. The endowment also frequently included the gift of tithes, or a portion of the tithes, of manors held by the founder. Temporalities included gifts of land, ranging from small parcels to complete manors; mills or a proportion of the proceeds of manorial mills; urban properties; miscellaneous other income-producing properties such as fisheries, salt works and coalmines; and rights of various kinds, such as avoidance of tolls, rights of common, right to hold fairs, etc.

The foundation charter of Runcorn Priory listed the gifts that formed the canons' original endowment. For the sake of clarity these and subsequent gifts will be numbered consecutively (their location is shown in fig. 6). In the order in which they were listed in the 1115 charter, the original properties and privileges were:

1. All of Runcorn
2. The mill of Halton
3. Half the fisheries of Halton
4. Rights of common in woods, pastures and waters belonging to Halton
5. Half the baron's fishery at Thelwall, plus a bovate of land (about fifteen acres) and the fisherman
6. Two bovates of land in Widnes
7. Rights of common in the woods and pastures belonging to Appleton
8. Rights of common in the woods and pastures of Cuerdley
9. Two bovates of land in Halton and a house there
10. The mill of Barrow
11. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of Barrow
12. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of Guilden Sutton
13. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of Staining
14. Half the township of Staining (three ploughlands)
15. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of Stanney
16. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of Raby
17. A house in Chester

18. The church of Great Budworth
19. The church of Castle Donnington
20. The tithe of the mill of Castle Donnington
21. A ploughland in Castle Donnington, and half a ploughland called Wavertoft in the same township
22. The church of Ratcliffe on Soar
23. The church of Kneesall
24. The tithe of the mills of Kneesall which are near Southwell
25. The tithe of the mill of 'Alreton'
26. The church of Burton upon Stather
27. The church of Pirton
28. One and a half ploughlands in Clifton (i.e. half the township)

It was not only the baron who provided the endowment. His retainers were also encouraged to contribute from their holdings. Hugh, son of Odard, was one of the benefactors. He was a member of the family that was later to adopt the name Dutton. The Duttons became major landowners in the area and eventually the principal benefactors of the Priory. Hugh granted the canons a mill jointly with his brother Gilbert, and Hugh alone gave a piece of land:

29. The mill of Walton
30. A furlong of land between Runcorn and Weston

Someone named Thurston (presumably the holder of one of the knight's fees in the barony) gave:

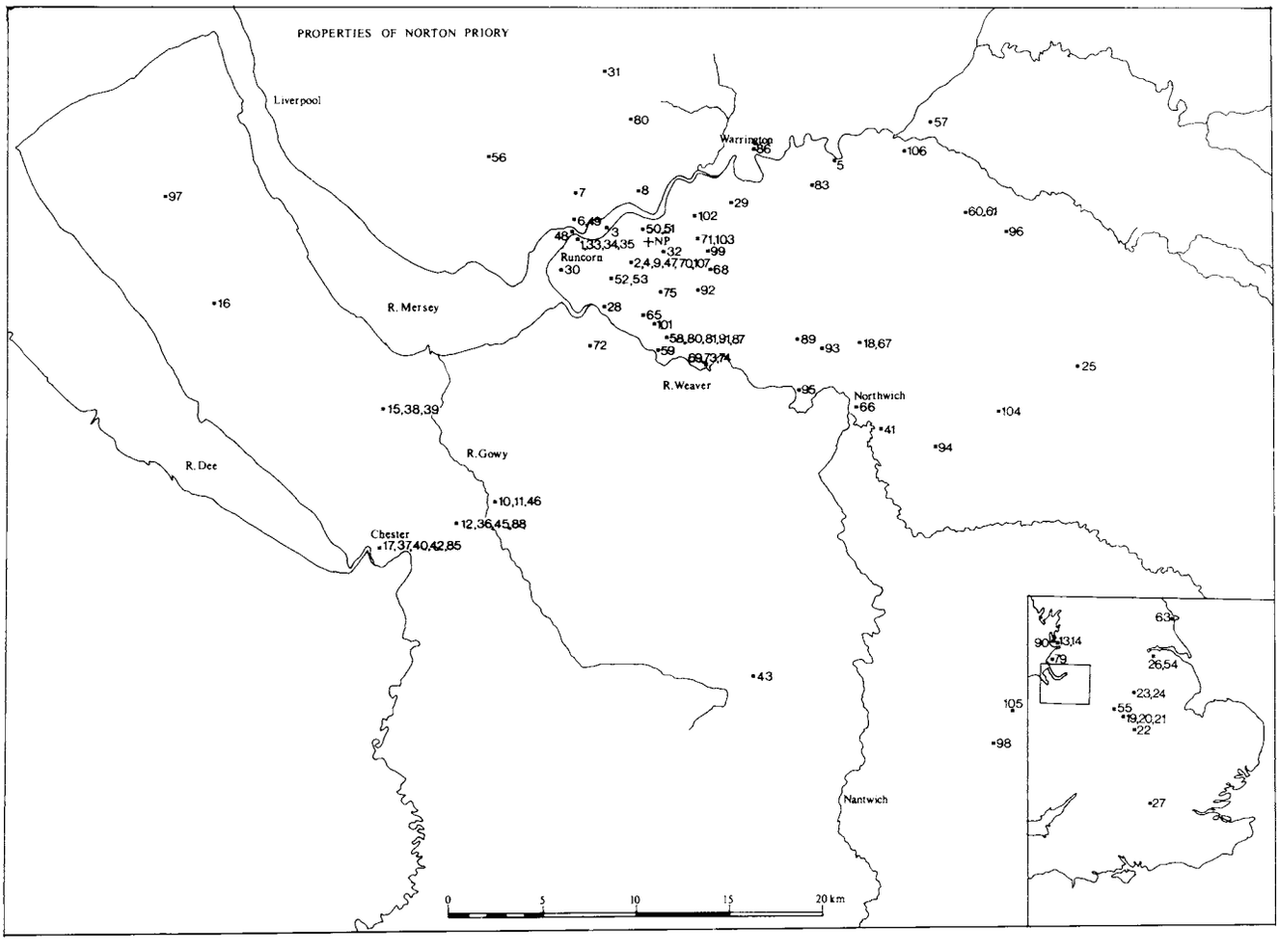
31. Two thirds of tithes of Sutton beyond the Mersey

The document states that the alms were given free of all services, customs, pleas and plaints.

Of the places mentioned, Runcorn, Halton, Thelwall, Clifton, Walton and Weston are all in north Cheshire along the south bank of the Mersey. Widnes, Appleton, Cuerdley and Sutton beyond the Mersey are all in south Lancashire. Barrow and Guilden Sutton are both near Chester, and Stanney and Raby are on the Wirral. Staining is in north Lancashire, Great Budworth is a large parish to the east of Runcorn, Castle Donnington is in Leicestershire, Ratcliffe on Soar and Kneesall are in Nottinghamshire. Burton on Stather is in Lincolnshire and Pirton is in Oxfordshire.

The total area of land comprised six ploughlands and five bovates in addition to Runcorn, which on the evidence of the Norton charter probably consisted of three ploughlands (a total in the region of 500 hectares or about

Fig. 6. The location of Norton Priory's properties.



1,200 acres, if a bovate is assumed to be 15 acres – Tait 1939, 12).

The move to Norton involved a relatively simple adjustment of the original endowment. The new charter granted the canons the manor of Norton, and changed their habitation from Runcorn to Norton. In exchange for their new manor, the canons had to relinquish their three ploughlands in Staining (endowment number 14), one and a half ploughlands in Clifton (28 – which the charter mistakenly records as Aston) and the whole of Runcorn (1) with the exception of the church, half a ploughland and one fishery. The four new items listed in the Norton foundation charter are therefore:

32. The manor of Norton
33. The church of Runcorn
34. Half a ploughland in Runcorn
35. One fishery in Runcorn

The total exchange was seven ploughlands, according to a charter of confirmation issued by Henry II (Beamont 1873, 151). It must have been of great benefit to the canons, for by divesting themselves of their holding in the distant manor of Staining, and the two holdings in Runcorn and Clifton, they were able to acquire a single but extensive manor within which their new priory could be established. It is interesting to note that the figure of seven ploughlands mentioned in the Henry II charter is close to the Domesday assessment of Norton which in 1086 was stated to have 'land enough for six ploughs' (Tait 1920).

The date of the foundation of the priory at Norton is generally accepted as being 1134, which is the year given by the *Annales Cestrienses*, although the dates 1133 and 1135 have also sometimes been mentioned (Tait 1939, 2 – followed by Dickinson 1950; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 168; and *VCH Chester* 3, 165).

Further gifts

William fitz William's foundation charter, whilst it confirmed existing grants and consolidated the greater part of the land holdings through exchange, did not bestow any extra gifts on the canons. However, as the twelfth century progressed a series of new and valuable benefactions took place. In most cases the precise date of a gift is not known, and it is through various charters of confirmation that the growth in the priory's possessions must be traced.

One particular grant is unusual and interesting. By 1144 or 1145 William fitz William was dead and had been succeeded as baron of Halton by the husband of his elder sister Agnes. Eustace fitz John had by his previous marriage added the baronies of Malton and Alnwick to his original inheritance of Knaresborough. The acquisition of the important barony of Halton extended his influence to the west of the Pennines. The constableship of Cheshire was conferred on him by Earl Randle Gernons, and it was while fighting in that office against the Welsh that he met his death in 1157 (Beamont 1873, 11). It was therefore sometime during the period 1144–57 that the grant was made by Eustace fitz John to Hugh de Cathewic of pasturage for one hundred sheep 'upon condition that a final end is made of building the church at Norton in every part according to the first foundation of William fitz Nigel' (Tait 1939, 16). The identity of Hugh de Cathewic, and the implications of the wording of the grant, will be considered later. Of relevance to the subject of benefactors however, is the acknowledgement by Eustace fitz John of the role of patron, ensuring the completion of work originally planned by his predecessor, William fitz Nigel.

Monastic patronage was an activity with which Eustace fitz John was familiar. He founded four religious houses. The first was Augustinian – the Priory of St Mary at North Ferriby (East Yorks.), which he established in about 1140 (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 168). His interest then changed to the Premonstratensian order, for in 1147 he founded Alnwick Abbey (Northumberland) (*ibid.*, 185). Three years later he chose the order of St Gilbert of Sempringham for two more foundations in Yorkshire, Malton Priory and Watton Priory (*ibid.*, 196 and 198). He had already, in 1133, provided emergency assistance to the starving monks at Fountains (Gilyard-Beer and Coppack, 1986, 149).

Apart from the pasturage grant to the master mason there are no specific references to gifts by Eustace fitz John to the priory. However, a charter issued by Henry II and witnessed by Richard de Beaumis, who was bishop of London from 1152 until 1163, lists a number of properties in addition to those mentioned in the foundation charter without specifying the donor (Beamont 1873, 151). Some may have been given by fitz John. The additional properties are:

36. Half the township of Guilden Sutton
37. The church of St Michael, Chester, with one house
38. Two bovates of land in Stanney
39. The tithe of the mill at Stanney

The canons are said themselves to have bought:

40. Two houses in Chester

In the case of three gifts, the donor is named. From the estate of Warren de Vernon, the canons were given:

41. Two bovates of land in Shurlach (Davenham parish)

From the fee of the bishop of Chester they received:

42. One plot of land without the gate of the city of Chester

From the fee of Robert de Stafford came:

43. One bovate of land in Calvedon

Endowments in the later twelfth century

The endowment of the priory continued to grow in the later part of the twelfth century. A number of new properties appear in a charter of confirmation which Earl Roger, the seventh baron of Halton, issued in about 1195

(dated by Barraclough 1957, 26; published by Beamont 1873, 162–3). The possessions and privileges with two exceptions are stated to have been given or confirmed by Earl Roger's ancestors; he succeeded to the barony in 1190. The additional items are:

44. The whole chaplainship of the constableship of Chester with all its appurtenances
45. One ploughland between Guilden Sutton and the bridge of Stamford, called Dunnescroft, with a meadow called Witaker
46. The tithe of a mill which John fitz Richard (the sixth baron) built on the dam of Barrow mill
47. The tithes of other mills which John built in his territory of Halton
48. The tenth part of the profits of Runcorn ferry
49. Half the demesne tithes of Widnes
50. The land which Gilbert Follis held, which is before the canon's gate
51. One parcel of land called Roger's Croft, between the canons' fishpool and Astmoor wood
52. Two deer from the baron's park at Halton each year at the Assumption of the Blessed Mary
53. Rights of the canons' swine to forage for mast with the baron's swine

It is clear that only the last two items are new grants by Earl Roger himself. In addition to the above, a number of gifts had been made by benefactors other than the baron's family. Roger fitz Alured gave for the soul of Leceline, his wife:

54. One house in Burton on Stather

The same Roger gave for the soul of Matilda, his wife:

55. One house in Derby

The charter lists other properties that had been granted by the knights of the barony, and confirmed by Earl Roger's ancestors:

56. One bovate of land in Tarbock
57. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of half of Warburton on Mersey
58. Two thirds of the demesne tithes of Aston held by Roger fitz Alured
59. One third of the tithe of the fisheries of Aston
60. The mill of Millington
61. One parcel land in Millington called Mulincroft

The charter repeats the usual formula discharging the canons from all secular sevices, but mentions for the first time:

62. The right of the canons to hold their own court

In only three cases are the gifts made by people other than the baron's family attributed by name – numbers 54, 55 and 58, all of which were given by Roger fitz Alured, who was related by marriage to the Duttons (see below).

It can probably be asssumed that number 59 was also given by fitz Alured. The grant of a bovate of land in Tarbock, number 56, was renewed by Robert de Tarbock in the late thirteenth century (*VCH Lancashire* 3, 177) and was presumably a gift made by one of his ancestors. The donor of tithes in Warburton (number 57) was probably a member of the Dutton family, which held land there.

It is fortunate that a later charter of confirmation obtained from Edward III in 1329 names the donor of the Millington properties (numbers 60 and 61) as Wrono Punterling (Beamont 1873, 171). He had been given half the manor by John, constable of Chester, in the reign of Henry II; the grant, which was witnessed by Hugh Dutton and his son Adam, names him as Wrono of Stretton, a manor near Millington, which must have been his main possession (Ormerod 1882, 1, 447).

The total endowment listed in the charter of 1195 represents a considerable expansion compared to the properties and privileges listed in the 1115 and 1134 foundation charters. This is of particular significance when the evidence of the excavation is considered. It was in the late twelfth century and at the beginning of the thirteenth that Norton Priory underwent a massive expansion. The evidence is that the number of canons was doubled, with buildings erected capable of housing two dozen or so brethren. To finance the new building programme, and to provide for the increased running costs of the community, extra endowments would have been needed; the evidence of the charters is that such support was indeed forthcoming.

The increase in the endowment of the priory is clear when each of the categories of possession or privilege is compared:

1134	1195
Seven churches	Eight churches
Two houses	Five houses
Three mills, and a quarter of another	Four mills, and a quarter of another
Tithes of four mills	Tithes of (at least) eight mills
A proportion of tithes of six manors	A proportion of tithes of nine manors
Eight parcels of land	Seventeen parcels of land
Rights of common in three townships	Rights of common in four townships
One fishery, and half of two other fisheries	One fishery, half each of two other fisheries, and a proportion of tithes of another
	The chaplainship of the constableship
	One tenth of the profits of Runcorn ferry
	Two deer each year

The relationship of Norton Priory with the barons of Halton after 1200

By the end of the twelfth century the pattern of new endowment for Norton Priory was beginning to change. Since 1115 the initiative had lain with the founders, and their successors as barons of Halton, who continued to act

as patrons. It was they who provided Norton with its substantial endowment, mainly by direct gift but also through the encouragement of their knightly retainers. By 1200 however the flow of gifts from the patrons had slowed to a trickle, and henceforth the barons of Halton played little part in the development of the priory.

One reason for this was the establishment, in 1178, of the Cistercian abbey of Stanlow by John fitz Richard, the sixth baron of Halton. Stanlow became the burial place of the barons, whose graves are said to have been removed to Whalley when the monks moved there in 1296 (*VCH Lancashire* 2, 131–3). The location at Stanlow, established with Cistercian fervour in a particularly inhospitable spot on the fringe of the Mersey estuary, proved too severe. Whalley was eventually granted to the monks by Henry de Lacy. As the place of burial, Stanlow had a clear advantage over Norton when further benefaction was being considered.

Fig. 7. Skeleton of a man who had suffered from Paget's disease. The coffin lid with shields (fig. 8) sealed this coffin; the bones are *in situ*. Note the collapsed cranium, and the burial of the corpse with forearms crossed.

There is no evidence that any of the five barons who died after the foundation of Runcorn Priory in 1115 and before the foundation of Stanlow Abbey were buried at Runcorn (in the case of William fitz Nigel) or at Norton (in the case of William fitz William and his successors). William fitz Nigel was apparently buried at Chester (Beamont 1873, 9), and his son, who died in Normandy (*ibid.*, 11) was probably buried there. Eustace fitz John may have been buried at Norton, but it seems more likely that his body was taken to one of the religious houses he himself had founded. The burial place of his son, Richard is not known; it was Richard's son, John, who founded Stanlow, but he died in Palestine in 1190 while taking part in the Third Crusade (Barraclough 1957, 19).

Only two members of the baronial family are definitely known to have been buried at Norton. One was Richard, the brother of Roger, the seventh baron, buried at Norton in 1211 (*ibid.*, 164). Richard was a leper, and it is possible that he had spent his last days in the priory infirmary. Leprosy was a term which covered a great many diseases in the medieval period, and there is a possibility that one of the graves excavated within the nave of the church was that of Richard. In a sandstone coffin with an impressively carved lid was the skeleton of a man who had suffered from Paget's disease, a cancer which affects the structure of the bone of the skull (fig. 7). In this case the skull had become thickened and spongy, and the anterior lobes had collapsed. The coffin lid (fig. 8) was carved in relief with a cross within a roundel, the shaft terminating in a simple calvary. On either side of the shaft, also in relief, was a shield – a symbol of a knight. Alongside this grave was another sandstone grave slab that had covered the position of a wooden coffin with a sword (another knight symbol) carved in relief alongside the cross shaft. Nearby were two more grave slabs, one plain and the other of twelfth-century type with an incised cross, and an incised rectangle (representing the book of a cleric?). The group of coffins was situated on the south side of the nave, near the screen which separated it from the choir. In front of the screen were the fragmentary remains of an altar. Thus although the identification of the occupant of the coffin with shields with Richard must be tentative, the possibility does exist that it was he who was buried in the nave chapel.

The second person associated with the baronial family known to have been buried at Norton Priory was

Alice, niece of William, Earl Warenne, the sixth earl of Surrey, who granted the prior of Norton in order to maintain a pittance for her soul:

63. Thirty shillings a year from Sewerby (Yorks.)

Knowledge of the grant is due to an entry in the *Calendar of Close Rolls 1323–1327* (page 245) for 16 December 1324, when the rent was in arrears. The date of the original grant must be before 1240. Alice was probably a daughter of Ela, sister of William of Warenne (1202–40) (Clay 1949, 233–4). Ela married Robert de Lacy, who died in 1193. She was dowered in various lands in the Lacy fee (Clay 1949, 21). As a member of the family of the baron of Halton Alice presumably lived in the vicinity of Norton.

The involvement of the barons of Halton with other religious houses, particularly Stanlow, was one of the reasons why the flow of benefactions to Norton Priory from that source ceased in the late twelfth century.

Fig. 8. Coffin lids, one with shields and another with a sword (the latter damaged in the nineteenth century) found in the nave. The cross and sides of the large lid are expertly carved, the shields less so.

Successive holders of the title had in any case provided Norton with a generous endowment. There was another reason however for their interest to slacken. The descent of the barons was marked by union with other titles (ultimately with the House of Lancaster) through marriage or inheritance, which had the consequence of weakening the link with Halton.

When Norton Priory was granted the status of abbey by Pope Boniface IX in 1391 John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, was named as patron, and petitioner with the prior and convent of Norton to Boniface (*Cal. Papal Reg.* 4, 405). Two centuries after endowments from the barons had ceased, John of Gaunt was still prepared to acknowledge his hereditary role as patron, and was willing to lend his weight to Norton's petition to Rome.

The Dutton family and Norton Priory

The involvement of the Duttons with the priory began with gifts from Hugh, son of Odard, and his brother Gilbert as part of the original endowment (numbers 29 and 31). As the interest of the barons of Halton waned in the late twelfth century, the Dutton family assumed the role of principal benefactors of the priory. There were two main branches, one living at Dutton itself, the other at Sutton Weaver. Parts of the manor house at Sutton still exist. Hidden by the brick exterior of the large farmhouse of Sutton Hall Farm is a large timber-framed building. In the attics of the farmhouse are substantial remains of a fifteenth-century camber-beam roof, with windbraced rafters and purlins forming a pattern of quatrefoils. There can be little doubt that this manor house was one of the homes of the branch of the family that moved to Warburton and assumed that name. The branch originated in Adam de Dutton, the younger son of Hugh de Dutton, and grandson of Hugh fitz Odard. Adam possessed all of Warburton in the time of Richard I (Ormerod 1882, 1, 567). He cleared land near Stockham, which was granted to him by the canons of Norton, *c.* 1195–1205 (Barraclough 1957, 24–6). In return, he agreed to pay a rent at the feast of St Bertelin of:

64. Twelve pence each year

Adam also gave to the canons of Norton (Ormerod 1882, 1, 728):

65. Three shillings yearly from his mill at Sutton and after his death the mill itself
66. A salt house in Northwich (Barraclough 1957, 21)

It seems likely that he was the donor of the tithes of half of Warburton (number 57), and was no doubt influential in securing the support of his father-in-law, Roger fitz Alured (numbers 54, 55, 58 and perhaps 59). He died in about 1205 (*ibid.*, 21). Adam's successors retained the name Dutton until Peter Dutton made Warburton the principal manor in about 1300; henceforth they adopted the name of Warburton (Leycester 1666 in Ormerod 1882, 1, 642).

The main branch of the family lived at Dutton itself, though Hugh, son of Odard, must have had a dwelling at Keckwick, for it was there that he was visited on his deathbed by his lord William fitz Nigel and his son William. He surrendered his coat of mail and war-horse, and William fitz William was given a riding horse and a hawk; Hugh's son, Hugh, was confirmed in his inheritance (Ormerod 1882, 1, 690). It is the latter who appears to have been commonly called Hugh de Dutton, so perhaps it was during his lifetime that the manor house at Dutton was established.

It has been suggested that the baron of Halton, like Robert fitz Hugh of Malpas, had ten knights (Husain 1973, 105). Of the ten, the Dutton line seems to have been preeminent. Odard's original holding in Dutton (the largest of three parts) was held directly of the earl. His other holdings in the four townships of Halton, Aston, Weston and Whitley were held of the baron of Halton; Barraclough comments:

> 'among the Cheshire tenants of the constables of Chester none were more outstanding than the Duttons'(Barraclough 1957, 20).

The association of the two branches of the Dutton family with Norton Priory was strengthened during the thirteenth century by the provision of chaplains for two family chapels. Sir Thomas de Dutton built a chapel at Poolsey, a part of the township of Dutton situated on the north bank of the River Weaver. The name is derived from the position between the park pool and the river on a virtual island (Dodgson 1970, 113); in Leycester's time the chapel was still in existence but was described as being ruinous. Sir Thomas obtained permission for mass to be celebrated in the chapel, and in 1236 the prior covenanted with Hugh fitz Hugh de Dutton to find him a chaplain there for ever (Ormerod 1882, 1, 643). Twenty-six years later a similar agreement was made to permit the celebration of divine offices in the manor house at Sutton Weaver. Prior Roger and his convent granted the licence to Sir Geoffrey de Dutton, with the proviso that in the great festivals of the church his family were to attend the parish church at Runcorn and there make their offerings. The chaplain at his first entrance was to swear to be faithful to the church, and in no way defraud her. Sir Geoffrey and his wife, in the chapter house at Norton before the whole convent and many others, swore to observe the agreement (Beamont 1873, 166). It is interesting to note that the chapter house was used for this purpose, and that even a prominent benefactor was expected to present himself at the priory to swear to observe the terms that had been agreed.

Sometime in the reign of Henry III, Geoffrey de Dutton had made a grant to Norton Priory of:

67. One third of the lands of Budworth

The grant was made on the condition that the canons should pray for his soul for ever more (Ormerod

1882, 1, 605). This was a valuable gift in the centre of the parish where they already possessed the church.

In 1290 licence for another Dutton gift was granted by Edward I. Peter de Dutton was permitted to grant the prior and convent (*Cal. Patent Rolls* 54, No. 41, p. 336):

68. A dwelling and fourteen acres in Newton near Preston on the Hill

Relations with benefactors were not always smooth. In 1315 it was necessary for Sir Hugh de Dutton to complain to the bishop of Lichfield and Coventry's officers that the prior and convent had not provided a chaplain and a lamp at Poolsey chapel acccording to the agreement of 1236. The prior was ordered to correct the situation (Beamont 1873, 170). This dispute does not appear to have caused lasting harm, for in 1329 recent gifts from Hugh de Dutton's son, another Hugh, were licensed under the Act of Mortmain. They comprised:

69. Two shillings and eight pence from the rent of Poolsey
70. Four shillings from the land of John the Digger of Halton
71. Timber from the wood of Keckwick to repair the mill of Keckwick
72. Land in Frodsham with its appurtenances
73. Land in Poolsey with the chapel
74. All the cleared land in Poolsey and pasture there for sixty beasts

The gifts are stated to have been made before the publication of the Statute of Mortmain, which placed restrictions on gifts to the Church (Beamont 1873, 171). The total amount of land that the canons acquired in Poolsey was substantial – in a later document it is described as the 'manor of Poolsey in Dutton' (Beamont 1873, 178). It is likely that the grant of the chapel at Poolsey to the canons was a result of Thomas de Dutton's addition of a chapel to the manor house at Dutton in 1272 (Anon. 1901, ix). The new chapel would have been much more convenient, and it is likely that the privileges previously granted to the Poolsey chapel were transferred to it.

Burial of the Duttons at Norton

The gifts that were confirmed in 1329 are the last big donations to the priory by the Dutton family for which records exist. Later gifts are minor in comparison, taking the form of bequests linked with burial of the donor at the priory, or specific requests for prayers for the dead.

There are three wills in which Norton Priory is specified as the intended burial place of a member of the Dutton family. The earliest is dated 1392, in which Lawrence de Dutton bequeathed his body to be buried at Norton, giving his black horse to the convent of Norton as a heriot (a death gift), also sixteen torches and five tapers about his body on burial day, with sixteen poor men in gowns to carry the lights, also ten marks to the poor, and thirty pounds to sufficient chaplains to celebrate for his soul the next year, two in the church of Budworth and four in the chapel at Dutton (Ormerod 1882, 1, 648).

Lawrence de Dutton makes no large donation to the canons – his only gift is his black horse. Instead of requiring the canons to pray for his soul, he makes arrangements for six chaplains to carry out the task at Budworth and Dutton. Of particular interest is the information the will contains about the form of the funeral, clearly a solemnly impressive ceremony.

The will of a member of the second branch of the Dutton family was made on 1 September 1448. Sir Geoffrey Warburton wished to be buried within the monastery at Norton, between the high chancel and the chapel of the blessed Mary. He left to the priest celebrating before his tomb for the year one hundred shillings; to the abbot of Norton he left his best horse; to Thomas de Sutton (chaplain at the Sutton Weaver manor house?) one hundred shillings out of the farm of his church at Wrexham to celebrate for his soul for a year; and he left one hundred shillings to John Humbleton, chaplain, for the same purpose (Ormerod 1882, 1, 572).

There are a number of interesting aspects of this will. One is the reference to the 'chapel of the blessed Mary', the location of which will be discussed later. Provision for prayers to be said for his soul consists of money payments (at the same rate as in Lawrence de Dutton's will) to three named clerics; there is no general gift to the abbey. The abbot is to receive a heriot in the form of Sir Geoffrey's best horse, a similar gift to that received on the death of Lawrence de Dutton.

One person, not buried at Norton, nonetheless bequeathed money. Lady Strangways, the wife of Sir Richard Strangways, died in a friary in York in 1500. She had previously been married to Roger Dutton, and bequeathed ten marks to Norton for prayers for her soul and that of her first husband (*Testamenta Eboracensia* 4, Surtees Soc. 53, 1868, 188).

The third will of a person buried at Norton to have survived is that of Lady Strangways's son, Sir Lawrence de Dutton, made on 4 October 1527. In the will he stated:

> I bequeath my soul to Almighty God, beseeching humbly our Blessed Lady, and all the holy company of heaven, to be mediators for me to the Holy Trinity, to receive the same to the eternal bliss of heaven. And I will that my body shall be buried and interred amongst my ancestors in the chapel of our Blessed Lady within the monastery of Norton. And I will that every priest that shall be at my burying shall have, to pray for my soul, twelve pence, and every clerk, four pence, and every poor man and woman one penny.

In addition he left money for the 'reparation and ornamentation' of Budworth church, and a gift to the mother church of Coventry and Lichfield (transcript Chester Record Office EDA 2/1.15b).