GODSTOW ABBEY

Benedictine nuns of St Mary and St John the Baptist

County of Oxfordshire : Diocese of Lincoln
Founded c. 1130

Godstow was the only independent house of nuns founded during the reign of Henry I. No charter in his name has survived, and it is unlikely that there ever were any. This may reflect the time that elapsed between the informal emergence of Edith’s religious community and her being in a position to seek royal or episcopal charters. None the less the nuns had reason to think it was a charter of Henry I that they produced in Quo Warranto proceedings in 1284.

The traditional foundation date in 1133 derives from a later medieval origin-legend, and even there it is no more than a terminus ad quem. The earliest dated recognition of the abbey is a dedication charter of Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, datable to January 1139 (Ctl. Godstow, 7–9, no. 6, EEA 1 Lincoln 1067–1185, 20–22, no. 33). Two other episcopal acts from the same occasion have survived (Ctl. Godstow, 18, no. 23, EEA 1 Lincoln 1067–1185, 22–3, no. 34; Ctl. Godstow, 118, 132, nos. 221, 250, EEA 11 Exeter 1046–1184, 37–8, no. 38). The combined attestations point to a major event in the presence of the royal family and seven bishops. From its early years, the priory had a charter in the name of King Stephen from the day of the dedication (Ctl. Godstow, 9–10, no. 7; Ste/366, doubtful), an authentic gift by King Stephen (Ste/368, before
February 1141), and five charters of the Empress Matilda, who renewed Stephen’s gift. In one doubtful charter Matilda took the abbey into her protection, referring to it as ‘domum illam . . . quam pater meus et ego fundauimus’ (EM/370). The number of acts reflects the close connexion between Oxford and Matilda. Henry II gave the nuns the church of High Wycombe, perhaps in 1177 (H2/1190), and in 1182 he gave the church of Bloxham H2/1191). His mistress Rosamond de Clifford was buried in the abbey church. Thirteen acts of his for the nuns of Godstow have survived, all except one of them in the cartulary compiled by the prioress, Alice Eaton, in 1404, King’s Remembrancer, Miscellaneous Books, E164/20 (Davis 462), of which an English abstract was made in the late fifteenth century, now Bodl. MS Rawlinson B. 408 (Davis 463). The one omission from the cartulary, H2/1187, was a general writ, exemplified by Henry III in 1262 on the grounds that his grandfather’s seal was worn out (CalPat 1258–1266, 199).

The community was founded by Edith, a resident of Winchester, who has been identified as the Edeva whom the first Winchester survey of 1102 × 1115 records as holding two tenements in Winchester (Winton Domesday, 43, 63; L. J. Smith, ‘Benedictine women at Oxford: the nuns of Godstow’, Benedictines in Oxford (London, 1997), 98–99). By the time of the second Winchester survey, 1148, these same tenements were held by the nuns of Godstow. A narrative in Anglo-Norman verse tells how Edith, widow of William Launceleve, was living as a devout widow at Binsey when she was inspired to found a nunnery, whose site at Godstow was revealed to her by a light from heaven (Ctl. Godstow, 3–6, no. 2). The narrative goes on to say how Edith went to King Henry for his support, with which the nunnery was founded. No year is mentioned, but the king’s departure from England in July 1133 fixes a terminus ad quem. The house of God is said to have come into being on Easter eve

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1 The text of Ste/366 must be challenged, though its witnesses are perfectly appropriate to the occasion of the dedication and it is place-dated at Oxford; H. E. Salter, ‘A charter of Stephen of January 1139’, EHR 25 (1910), 114–16, invoked it in dating Ste/473 for Lincoln cathedral, with which it shares seven witnesses. Instead of the usual dispositive wording, however, it has a brief dispositive formula not appropriate to royal drafting; it lacks any Quare uolo, again substituting a form not used by the king’s draftsmen; its witnessing formula is unconventional, including an anathema; and the presence of the legate is introduced in an unusual clause at the very end. The substantial list of gifts does not include all of those mentioned in the act of Bishop Alexander at the time of the dedication. This is at best beneficiary drafting.

2 The editors of Regesta point out several anachronisms in the drafting, among them the lack of Matilda’s usual style, domina Anglorum.
while King Henry was still living, ‘locus iste incepit esse domus dei’ (Ctl. Godstow, 3, no. 1). How long elapsed between these events and the dedication of the church in 1139 is unknown, but the abbey’s confusion of the first two Henrys in Edward I’s time and the relatively abundant charters of Henry II show, first, that the abbey had retained its early documents, and second, that it could not reliably reconstruct its early history from them.

The best indicator of the foundation date is the deed of John de Saint-Jean, who gave the site itself (‘terram de Godestowe’) ‘to Edith the nun and to the nuns of her congregation’ (Ctl. Godstow, 6, no. 3), the first deed in the cartulary. This wording implies that the congregatio of nuns was already in existence, arguably near the church at Binsey. The very name ‘Godestowe’ denotes the religious colony, God’s place, and one may wonder why it is already attached to the land at the time of its gift. The new site was a mile or so further north, part of Wolvercote, which had been held by Roger d’Ivri in 1086 (DB, i. 159a; Oxon § 29. 23); it had passed to Thomas de Saint-Jean and then his brother John de Saint-Jean. The deed is addressed to Bishop Alexander and all the barons of Oxfordshire, and a case can be made that John’s gift to the nuns was linked to his first taking his place among the barons of Oxfordshire. Emilie Amt has dated the deed to 1123 × 1139, that is, after Alexander became bishop of Lincoln in Lent 1123, and before he dedicated the church at Godstow in January 1139. The pipe roll of 31 Henry I sheds further light, showing that John de Saint-Jean only came into possession of lands in Oxfordshire when he succeeded to his brother’s fee, very likely in 1128–9. In 1130 John was still paying the relief ‘pro terra Thome fratris sui in Anglia’ (PR 31 Henry I, 3). His debt stood at 160

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3 Emilie Amt’s discussion of the foundation date makes a case that the nuns might have gathered around Edith from as early as 1115 (Amt, Ctl. Godstow, xix–xxii).

4 PN Oxon, 26 (‘so called from the Benedictine nunnery’). A deed of Reginald de Saint-Valery (who succeeded John de Saint-Jean as lord of Wolvercote) confirms the gift of the site, ‘insulam in qua predicta ecclesia fabricata est que uocatur Godestowa’ (Ctl. Godstow, 11–12, 394, nos. 10, 852, 1148 × 1166). The site, between two strands of the Thames, was in Oxfordshire and in Lincoln diocese, so we may deduce that the main channel of the river, serving as the boundary with Berkshire, then passed west of the abbey. Wolvercote was a part of the Oxford city parish of St Peter in the East (VCH Oxon, xii. 304) and therefore not part of the Northgate hundred, which lay between the vill and the town. The site of the abbey was exempted from parochial and archidiaconal jurisdiction by Bishop Alexander, with the consent of Archdeacon Walter, at the time of the dedication in 1139 (Ctl. Godstow, 18, no. 23; EEA 1 Lincoln 1067–1185, 22–3, no. 34; with Walter’s later confirmation, Ctl. Godstow, 18–19, no. 25; Kemp, Archidiaconal Acta, 103–4, no. 167).
marks, from which he paid 40 marks. Since reliefs started as round numbers, we may plausibly guess that it started as 200 marks and that a first instalment of 40 marks had been accounted for at Michaelmas 1129. An older debt is made unlikely by the clustering of several subsidiary entries in the same roll, entries which significantly connect with the witnesses to John’s deed. Bishop Alexander of Lincoln was the first witness, and a closing note says that the deed was made in the presence of Bishop Roger of Salisbury. The second witness is Robert II d’Oilly, the sheriff in 1129–30, who unusually precedes the other clerical witnesses. John de Saint-Jean had followed his brother Thomas in succession to the landed interests of Roger d’Ivri, who, with Robert I d’Oilly, had established the canons of St George in Oxford castle. The precedence given to Robert II d’Oilly continues the appearance of a family partnership with John de Saint-Jean. The four clerical witnesses follow, Walter, long-serving archdeacon of Oxford (c. 1110–51), William the rural dean, Master R, and Q, a chaplain. Next is Walkelin Wadard, son and successor of Wadard who had been a major tenant of Bishop Odo in Oxfordshire in 1086 and who retained his lands in chief after the bishop’s exile. In 1086 Wadard already had an unnamed son who held two manors as tenant of Roger d’Ivri (DB, i. 156d, 159a; Oxon §§ 9, 6, 29, 16). In 1130 this Walkelin rendered account for 100 marks ‘from the forfeitures of the liveries of the shire court of Oxfordshire’ (PR 31 Henry I, 4). Next is B. Hareng, perhaps father to Fulk Hareng who attested a deed for Thame abbey in Buckinghamshire around 1138 (Ctl. Thame, 4), and who was surely married to a daughter of Walkelin Wadard, leaving an heir Walkelin Hareng (VCH Oxon, v. 309–17; Berks, iv. 471–4). Next is G. de Monte, perhaps heir of Richard de Monte who had served alongside Thomas de Saint-Jean as sheriff of Oxfordshire (Chr. Abingdon, § 172; see 000, Regesta 937 for Abingdon). Next is Geoffrey Luvel, who in 1130 rendered account for 30 marks, which he had delivered in coin to John de Saint-Jean from the king’s dues in Buckinghamshire ‘sine precepto regis’ (PR 31 Henry I, 101). Next is Hugh Talemasche, who in 1130 rendered account for £4 13s 4d (7 marks), which he had delivered in coin to John de Saint-Jean ‘sine precepto regis’ (PR 31 Henry I, 3). Why two of the witnesses had paid money (nummi, denarii) to John de Saint-Jean is not apparent, but the transactions appearing in the same pipe roll suggest that his seisin in the county was recent and the men involved stood at his side when he made his gift in the presence of the bishop of Lincoln and the bishop of
Salisbury. These circumstances probably favour a date for his giving the site at Godstow within a year or two on either side of Michaelmas 1130.

The placing of royal acts in the cartulary is not consistent. While the majority are placed together at fols. 166v–182r (Ctl. Godstow, 340–57, nos. 737–68), acts of Matilda and Henry II are also scattered through the topographical sequence. The one act of Henry I is given a prominent position among foundation documents, after John de Saint-Jean’s deed and (oddly) a later quitclaim concerning land close to the abbey site in Wolvercote. King Henry’s writ-charter allowed Aelwin fitz Godegos to convey land to support a new church of St Giles in the hundred outside the north date of Oxford (000, Regesta 1836; Ctl. Godstow, 6–7, no. 5), a church which the founder would give to the nuns in 1139. This is separated from other deeds concerning St Giles’s church (Ctl. Godstow, 204–7, nos. 413–16). If all the gifts made or confirmed at the dedication in January 1139 came with deeds, only the more important one have been preserved. Royal acts, however, appear to have been carefully retained, and none of those given by Stephen, Matilda, or Henry II cites any charter of Henry I as precedent. It is a probable inference that the nuns had not sought the king’s seal before the dedication of their church in King Stephen’s reign.


See also AELWIN FITZ GODEGOS.

00 Citation of a supposed act of Henry I giving to the nuns of Godstow the church of Bloxham (Oxon).

SOURCE: Oxfordshire Eyre Roll 13 Edward I, PRO JUST1/704 [B].
PRINTED: PQW, 663–4 [from B].
CALENDAR: Not in Regesta.

Abbatissa de Godestowe summonita fuit ad respondendum domino regi quo warranto clamat habere emendas panis et cervisie fracte in Bloxham

5 Bishop Alexander refers to gifts by King Stephen, Queen Matilda, their son Eustace, four bishops, two abbots, and fifteen lay benefactors. Documents in support of clauses in the dedication charter and surviving are Bishop Alexander’s own (Ctl. Godstow, nos. 6, 23), Bishop Robert of Exeter (nos. 221 = 250), John de Saint-Jean (no. 3), Robert II d’Oilly (no. 587), Earl Robert of Leicester (no. 253), Walter de Peri (no. 58), and Simon de Wahelle (no. 870).
que ad coron(am) et dignitatem domini regis pertinent sine licencia etc. Et abbatissa uenit et dicit quod dominus Henricus rex primus dedit deo et ecclesie sancte Marie et sancti Iohannis Bapiste de Godestowe et monialibus ibidem deo seruentibus ecclesiam de Bloxham in proprios usus cum omnibus pertinenciis suis. Et dicit quod predicta libertas precipiendi huiusmodi emendas assise panis et cervisie fracte tunc temporis fuit pertinens ad predictam ecclesiam. Et omnes illi qui rectores eiusdem ecclesie existitertunt ante donacionem predictam eis inde factam semper huiusmodi emendas perceperrunt et percipere consueuerunt tanquam pertinentes ad predictam ecclesiam. Et de hoc ponit se super patriam. Ideo inquiratur.

The abbess of Godstow was summoned to respond to the lord King by what warrant she claims to have the amends of bread and ale breached in Bloxham, which belong to the Crown and dignity of the lord king unless licence &c. And the abbess comes and says that the lord King Henry I gave to God and the church of St Mary and St John the Baptist of Godstow and to the nuns serving God there the church of Bloxham to their own use with all its appurtenances. And she says that the foresaid liberty of receiving such amends of the assise of bread and ale breached at the time pertained to the foresaid church. And all who had been rectors of that church before it was given to them always received such amends and had the custom of receiving them as pertaining to the foresaid church. And on this she submits herself to the decision of the jury. Therefore inquest is ordered.

DATE, CONTEXT: The church of Bloxham (Oxon) was given to the nuns of Godstow by King Henry II, whose charter survives, H2/1191, datable January × March 1182 (Cilt. Godstow, 44–5, no. 68), which conferred the church on the nuns subject to the life interest of Roger de Clifford. The usual inclusion in the Quare uolo clause of the words ‘cum omnibus libertatibus suis’ did not extend to amends for breach of the assise of bread and ale, which was not enacted until 51 Henry III. The cartulary also includes the act of the archdeacon of Oxford, instituting the nuns as parsons of Bloxham at the king’s presentation, saving the rights of Roger de Clifford (Cilt. Godstow, 45, no. 69; Kemp, Archidiaconal Acta, 112, no. 183). In the 1170s the church had been held by Seffrid, archdeacon of Chichester, one of whose acts had passed with the church to the nuns of Godstow (Cilt. Godstow, 51–2, no. 82; Kemp, Archidiaconal Acta, 10, no. 13, datable c. 1175 × 1176).