ABBOTSBURY ABBEY

Benedictine abbey of St Peter

County of Dorset : Diocese of Salisbury
Founded in Edward the Confessor’s reign

The Benedictine abbey of Abbotsbury was founded by Orc, a thegn of King Cnut, and his wife Tola, who introduced monks to the secular minster of St Peter that had long existed on the site. Orc was granted seven hides of land at Portesham near Abbotsbury in 1024; the diploma (S 961) survives as an original among documents from Abbotsbury preserved by the Strangways family, who bought the abbey following the Dissolution. Sir Henry Spelman copied part of another diploma of Cnut, granting seventeen hides at Abbotsbury to Orc (Keynes, ‘Lost cartulary’, 229–31, no. 4). A writ-charter of Edward the Confessor granted to Orc rights over the shore of his lands (S 1063, datable 1053 × 1058). Orc was also the founder of the gild at Abbotsbury, whose statutes in Old English have been preserved (OS Facsimiles, ii, Ilchester 4). Another document from Abbotsbury preserved in part by Spelman is King Edward’s grant of two and a half hides at Abbots Wootton to Tola, widow of Orc (Keynes, ‘Lost cartulary’, 232, no. 6). After 1058 King Edward notified the shire of Dorset that Orc’s widow Tola had his permission ‘to bequeath her land and possessions to St Peter’s at Abbotsbury as best pleases her with my full consent as fully and completely as it was arranged by the agreements previously made that it should, after the
death of both of them, herself and Orc her lord, pass into the possession of the holy monastery for their souls’ (S 1064). This is the earliest extant example of a royal licence to give property to the church as distinct from the confirmation of a gift. No clear date of foundation can be inferred, but the monastery is said to have been founded in 1044 with the introduction of monks from Cerne. This date is found in Thomas Gerard’s Survey of Dorsetshire, written in the 1620s, citing a narrative from the lost register of the abbey. There is a well-documented summary of the early history of the foundation in S. D. Keynes, ‘The lost cartulary of Abbotsbury’, Anglo-Saxon England 18 (1989), 207–243 (at pp. 207–212).

The holdings of the abbey in Dorset in 1066 were substantial, comprising twenty-two hides at Abbotsbury, twelve hides at nearby Portesham with five virgates in Shilvinghampton, eighteen hides at Tolpuddle, eighteen hides at Hilton, two and a half hides at Abbots Wootton, half a hide in Poorton, and two hides in Atrim, besides interests at Waddon and Little Cheselbourne (DB, i. 78b–c; § 13). At the time of the survey the monks stated that they had been disseised of some lands by the former sheriff Hugh fitz Grip, whose widow still detained the land in question. She would marry Alfred of Lincoln, who succeeded to Hugh’s lands and remained a powerful figure in Dorset during the reign of Henry I (N. Karn, ‘Secular power and its rewards in Dorset in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries’, Historical Research 82 (2009), 2–16).

The succession of abbots in the Anglo-Norman period is hardly known. Abbot Geoffrey was nominated by King Stephen in 1140, restoring the abbey’s independence after a long period when it had been held by Bishop Roger of Salisbury (John of Worcester, iii. 281; Gesta Stephani, § 46). Only one previous abbot is recorded, Aeswerdus, occurring in 1075 (Heads, i. 23). In 1166 Abbot Geoffrey referred to Bishop Roger’s custody of the abbey and mentioned an earlier abbot, unnamed, who had enfeoffed a knight named William and whose charter was sent to the king (RBE, 211, misinterpreted by VCH Dorset, ii. 53 as mention of an Abbot William temp. Henry II). The one document printed here was presumably obtained by the same unnamed abbot before Bishop Roger took control of the abbey at an unknown date.

The archive of Abbotsbury has not been well preserved. What remained at the abbey in 1541 was handed over to Sir Giles Strangways, and there is a brief description of its extent drawn up in 1604, from which Keynes, 213–14, prints extracts. At that date more than a hundred
original deeds survived. There remain three original pre-Conquest documents, but no original documents survive from the Anglo-Norman period. A cartulary was preserved until the seventeenth century; from Spelman’s extracts in his essay on ‘Feuds and tenures’, Keynes has been able to recover in whole or part several pre-Conquest documents not listed by Sawyer, some of which are referred to above.

For Anglo-Norman royal charters from Abbotsbury, we are now largely dependent on what the abbey chose to have enrolled during the later middle ages. Five authentic royal acts were exemplified in a charter of inspeximus dated 15 November 1269; these are William I’s confirmation to the abbey of the rights it had in the time of King Edward (W1/2), a writ in support of the abbot’s claim to exercise his right of wreck (W1/3), Henry I’s act below, a confirmation of the abbey’s rights by Stephen (Ste/1), and Henry II’s confirmation of the abbey’s rights held in return for the service of one knight (H2/1, whose original survives in the Strangways archive, Ilchester v. Raishley, no. 4a, now in Dorchester RO). The background to this inspeximus is perhaps indicated by an inquest ordered by a writ of Henry III, dated 27 August 1269 (CalIMisc, i. 123–4, no. 365), which concerns the abbot’s claim to the liberties and the rights of wreck as confirmed by Henry II (H2/2). The engrossment survives in a damaged state, but its text can be fully read in the charter roll. The inspeximus was itself inspected by Edward II in 1314 together with three Old English writ-charters of Edward the Confessor (S 1063, S 1064) and William I (W1/1). Edward II’s inspeximus was again confirmed by Henry VII in 1495, with the addition of a charter of Henry III granting a weekly market at Helton (CalCh, ii. 181, dated 20 May 1272). The rights of wreck provide the reason why Edward II’s inspeximus was confirmed in 1475 by Richard, duke of Gloucester, as admiral of England, and in 1524 by John Woodhall, commissary of the admiralty (engrossments in the Strangways archive, Ilchester v. Raishley, nos. 17a, 20a, both dated at Abbotsbury itself), though these do not preserve complete texts. Litigation on this subject arose again in 1662–3, when Sir John Strangways (1585–1666) defended his rights as successor to the abbot of Abbotsbury against the Lord High Admiral (Keynes, ‘Lost cartulary’, 218).

From the reign of Henry I, only the one document survives and that only because it was enrolled in 1269 in support of the abbot’s defence of the liberties granted and confirmed by successive kings from William I to Henry II. Later gifts are reflected in six private deeds also inspected by Henry III on the same date (CalCh, ii. 129–30). Three of
these are deeds by Alfred of Lincoln, not the king’s justice in Dorset from Henry I’s time but probably Alfred III fitz Alfred, who inherited in 1198 and died in 1240 (Sanders, *English Barones*, 99); he was great-grandson of the Alfred of Lincoln mentioned in the document printed below.


00 Writ-charter instructing that the abbot of Abbotsbury shall hold his goods, lands, men, and customs in peace and ordering the bishop of Salisbury and the justice of Dorset to protect them. 1102 × c. 1110, perhaps 1106


CHANCERY ENGROSSMENT: Dorset RO, Fox-Strangways Archive D/FSI Box 250 Ilchester v. Raishley, no. 6b, damaged inspeximus of 54 Henry III, dated 15 November 1269.

RECORD IN JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS: Exchequer Plea Roll 30 Edward III, E13/80, mem. 64d [copy of inspeximus of 8 Edward II].

ADMARITY INSPEXIMUS: Dorset RO, Fox-Strangways Archive D/FSI Box 250 Ilchester v. Raishley, no. 17a, confirmation by Richard, duke of Gloucester, as admiral of England, dated 4 November 1475 [from inspeximus of 8 Edward II], no. 20a, confirmation by John Woodhall, commissary of the admiralty, dated 1524 [from inspeximus of 8 Edward II].

PRINTED: J. Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, 3rd edn, ed. W. Shipp & J. W. Hodson, 4 vols (London, 1861–74), ii. 733 [from inspeximus of 54 Henry III]; *The Earl of Ilchester v. Raishley and others: Plaintiff’s documents of title*, High Court of Justice Chancery Division (1888), no. 6b (in English); *CalCh*, ii. 132 [from B]; N. Karn, ‘Secular power and its rewards in Dorset in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries’, *Historical Research* 82 (2009), 2–16 (at 12).

CALENDAR: *Regesta* 754.

Henricus rex Anglorum Rogero episcopo Saresbur(iensi) et A(julfo) cam(era)rio et omnibus fidelibus suis francis et anglis

Henry king of the English to Roger bishop of Salisbury and Aiulf the chamberlain and all his sworn men French and English of Dorset greeting. Know that I will and command that the abbot of Abbotsbury shall hold in peace and honour all his property and lands and men and customs as he well held them in my father’s time. And if anyone shall cause injury to them or their men, I command on £10 of forfeit that he shall do the abbot justice. And I command that Bishop Roger and Alfred of Lincoln shall keep and maintain the abbot and shall keep all his property lawfully and justly as my justiciars. Witness Alfred of Lincoln and Croc the huntsman. At Salisbury.

DATE: After Roger was nominated bishop of Salisbury, Michaelmas 1102, and no doubt before he seized control of the abbey (see Context). The terminus ad quem cannot be determined from the names mentioned. Aiulf the chamberlain was sheriff of Dorset in 1086, but when he demitted office is unknown, perhaps as early as 1107, 000, Regesta 1369 for Alfred of Lincoln in which Warin is addressed as sheriff (1107 × 1123), but perhaps as late as the 1120s. The editors of Regesta proposed a dating 1102 × 1116, based on the latest act in which Aiulf appears as sheriff, 0000, Regesta 1018 for Montebourg (1107 × 1118). Alfred of Lincoln appears in a Dorset context in 1091 and he was still the most substantial landholder in Dorset other than Bishop Roger and the earl of Gloucester in 1130 (PR 31 Henry I, 15–16). Croc the huntsman witnesses charters of William II, and is named in five acts of Henry I, all for Abingdon, two datable before 1111 and three before 1108. The editors of Regesta took a guess based on the place date: King Henry was certainly at Salisbury at Whitsun in 1106, hence their dating, ‘1106, c. May 13 ?’. In the light of Croc’s attestations, this is plausible but not established.
ADDRESS: The shire court of Dorset.
WITNESS: Alfred of Lincoln, apparently already acting as king’s justice in Dorset, and Croc the huntsman. They witness together at Westminster in 000, Regesta 615 for Abingdon, datable 1102 × 1110, concerning Welford (Berks); the two had shown the abbot the land in question.
PLACE: Salisbury, Wilts.
CONTEXT: It would appear that this is chiefly a writ requiring the king’s justices in Dorset to do justice in the abbot’s cause, though it is noteworthy that Alfred of Lincoln is not included in the address as justice. The two commands forming the second part of
the document are the essence of it; the notification forming the first part is in the nature of a preamble. It may have been intended that the text should be presented to the shire court, but its main concern is to instruct the king’s officers, and the linkage of Bishop Roger and Alfred of Lincoln as ‘iusticiarii mei’ in a local context is striking. Although the dating is uncertain, it is likely that this represents a very early example of the king’s calling on someone to ask as iusticiarius in a local context. Later evidence shows that the abbey of Abbotsbury was actually held by Bishop Roger himself, though surely not at the time of this writ. William of Malmesbury says that Roger attached the ancient abbeys of Abbotsbury and Malmesbury to his bishopric (Historia nouella, § 481), and John of Worcester, iii. 281, mentions the filling of these two abbacies in the context of Roger’s death. In 1166 Abbot Geoffrey’s statement to the king says, ‘Cum Rogerus episcopus habuit custodiam abbatie, duas hidas apud Atrim [Atrum] ad maritandam quandam neptem suam dedit Nicholao de Meriet, contradicente conuentu ecclesie’ (RBE, 211). It was surely the case that during the period when Roger had the abbey, he was himself de facto abbot. The king’s writ here orders him to keep and maintain the abbey, but he cannot be the unnamed abbot who sought the king’s seal. There is no means of knowing what danger caused the unknown abbot to ask for this writ, but he gained little security from it. Indeed it is possible that the writ placed the abbey in greater danger from Bishop Roger. Although Heads, i. 23, attaches the dates 1107–1139 to Roger’s holding Abbotsbury, there is no evidence to say when he took it over. He did not have control of Malmesbury abbey until 1118. The others named in the act may also have been the abbey’s territorial enemies. The disseisin by Hugh fitz Grip, mentioned in Domesday Book, may have been continued by Alfred of Lincoln, who took over Hugh’s lands or by Aiulf the chamberlain, who succeeded to Hugh’s office as sheriff.