

ELSTOW ABBEY & CHURCH – A BRIEF HISTORY

ELSTOW ABBEY – THE FOUNDING

It is, at this remove, impossible to give a fully accurate account of the founding of Elstow Abbey. What follows is based on information drawn from the Domesday Book and from other contemporary chronicles and accounts, as well as from more modern and trustworthy studies and sources.

Elstow Abbey was a Benedictine foundation. The Order of St Benedict was one of several “Orders” in the Middle Ages and included such as the Congregation of Cluny, the Cistercians and the Trappists. The Order was exiled from England along with all the others at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, but returned in the 19th Century following John Keble’s famous sermon of 1833 which gave so much impetus to the revivalist Oxford Movement. The Order was noted for its sense of community responsibility in contrast to the more austere and introspective nature of other more contemplative Orders, such as the Franciscans. As the Catholic Encyclopaedia puts it, the aim of St Benedict (480-543) was to institute “*an organization and a set of rules for the domestic life of such laymen as wished to live as fully as possible the type of life presented in the Gospel*”. There are, as at the date of this article, some forty-one active Benedictine institutions in England and many more elsewhere in the world.

The Abbey was founded in 1078 by Judith, Countess of Huntingdon and Northampton, niece of William I, an heiress in her own right in France and widow of the young but powerful Earl Waltheof of Northumbria.

Earl Waltheof had, as a young man, conspired unsuccessfully against William the Conqueror in 1069 and earlier, and as part of William’s subsequent appeasement strategy had, in 1070, been given his niece, Judith of Lens (which is near Arras and was in what was then Normandy) in marriage. In 1072, and as part of William’s on-going strategy, he was awarded the additional earldoms of Northampton and Huntingdon. But three years later, he was fatally implicated in, but not, so far as we can tell, the leader of, a further and equally unsuccessful rebellion; this time, he was duly executed in 1076 outside Winchester by a vengeful William.

Legend then turned him into a Christian martyr, but the veracity of some of those stories is questionable. The options were simple: either he was guilty as charged and therefore a Saxon hero as being a member of the anti-William faction, or he was innocent and therefore unjustly executed by the tyrannical new ruler of England. Both options had the potential to create a martyr of him.

After he died, Judith was allowed by a politically astute William to inherit Waltheof’s estates in the Midlands, but not those in the North where his power base had been. This ensured for the king a buffer state between the ever-turbulent northerners and the more pragmatically peaceful southerners.

And this is where an unverifiable story obscures the situation. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that she had been a material and damning witness against her own rebellious husband in late 1075 or early 1076. The reason we must adduce for this strange tale is that she, as a Norman, was so loyal a niece to William that she couldn’t bear to let her husband get away with treason. Other chroniclers suggest rather more believably that Waltheof had in fact encompassed his own demise by unwisely confiding in Archbishop Lanfranc, standing in as regent for an absent William who at the time was dealing bloodily with recalcitrant barons in Normandy. This may or may not have been the case: we shall never know. To confuse things further, there was also a widely held but dubious theory that her refusal to remarry and her founding of the Abbey at the age of about 24 or 25 were acts of remorse for what the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle claimed that she had done.

The verifiable facts seem to be as follows. In 1078, Judith, along with some other like-minded and wealthy people, founded an abbey at Elstow. In the early 1080s, she refused her uncle William's demand that she remarry, this time with Simon of Senlis, first Earl of Northampton. This demand was not complied with by her, but, a few years later, her eldest daughter, Maud, married Simon in 1090 (which was after William's death). On her refusal to marry him, Judith was promptly stripped of all her titles and possessions in England causing her flee for safety back to Normandy to her birthright properties in Lens in around 1086. What happened to her thereafter is shrouded in the mists of time.

The inferences we can draw are twofold. Firstly she was rather fonder of her husband than was often the case (they were more or less the same age and I prefer not to prosecute more modern theories put forward by the psychologists and sexologists). So far as we know, she was never to remarry. Secondly William can not have felt himself under any obligation to her for anything. Which, of course, means that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle may, here as elsewhere, be misleading us.

ELSTOW ABBEY – FROM FOUNDATION TO DISSOLUTION

The Abbey was dedicated to St Mary. Judith was the principal of several patrons and endowed it with property in Elstow, Wilshampstead and Maulden (and possibly Kempston) so as to ensure its financial security. It did, of course, take decades to build.

There are various mentions of the Abbey in the years between its foundation and its dissolution 461 years later. The earliest is Henry I's confirmation charter, granted in about 1126 and on completion of the Abbey's construction. This mentions Maud, Judith's eldest daughter, as being one among several current benefactors, including King Henry himself. In later years, there was mention of various scandals over the not untypical but nonetheless unseemly behaviour of the nuns and of the consequential disciplinary action taken. There are inevitably records of lawsuits one of which even led to Papal intervention before it could be settled.

As an example of how things could spiral out of control, Henry II (1154-1189) granted the nuns of Elstow the right to hold an annual fair, but it was to become so popular, successful and even rowdy that it aroused serious and even violent local opposition. However, the commercial success of the fairs resulted in a need for a lay trade centre; this led to the constructing, some time later, of the fine building known as the Moot Hall which still embellishes the village Green.

The Abbey's main day-to-day duties, in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict, were the singing or reciting of the daily offices, and the sharing of the celebration of the Mass with the laity. The members of the Abbey, and particularly the Abbess, were also closely involved in the supervision of the Abbey's various estates and properties, assets permitted under the Rule, travelling widely in the execution of these duties. (In case you are surprised to read this statement, this was entirely in line with normal Benedictine practice.) The vestigial remains of the once substantial buildings are a mute witness to the Abbey's prominence.

But storm clouds were blowing up.

After the break from Rome, which process started in fact before 1530 (the relevant Parliamentary Act, the Act of Supremacy, was in 1534), Henry VIII was particularly badly in need of money. On account of the revenues which perforce would revert to the crown, he caused a small number of the country's religious foundations to be dissolved in 1536 on the technical, but questionable, grounds of "treason" (then, as until recently, a capital offence). In the event, some foundations preferred to pay fines to avoid, or rather postpone, this fate. The 1536 Act resulted that autumn in a fruitless uprising (the so-called "Pilgrimage of Grace") and a consequent series of executions which were indiscriminate enough to include several heads of religious houses. This rebellion gave Henry the excuse, if he needed one, in a further Act of 1539 to dissolve the larger and richer houses (the 1536 "ceiling" had been set at the "clear value" figure of £200 income a year).

Elstow Abbey, with an annual “clear value” income of £284 12s 11¾d, according to the “*Valor Ecclesiasticus*” commissioned in 1535 by Henry, is recorded in David Baker’s careful study in the late 1960s as being the eighth richest nunnery in England. Some houses, such as the modestly wealthy Elstow preferred to “surrender” rather than go to trial for treason and risk losing everything if – or rather when – the courts decided against them. Elstow Abbey finally “surrendered” on 26th August 1539, thereby allowing the Abbess and 23 remaining Nuns to be granted pensions. Within four years of 1536 there were no monastic houses left in the country. [For a fuller picture of the financial status of the Abbey, please see the footnote at the end of this article.]

There was, at this point, a vote carried in Parliament to create a cathedral for Bedfordshire using the now available site but the motion never received the royal assent hoped for by its sponsor, Bishop Stephen Gardiner of Winchester [see Gilbert Burnet’s “*History of the Reformation of the Church of England*” for a fuller account of this rather sinister man’s life]. Gardiner, before being appointed to the see of Winchester in 1531 had been archdeacon of Bedford.....

And that, really, was that, except that the Church, significantly reduced in size to what we so fortunately have today, was to survive the Dissolution and the Abbey’s more-than-partial destruction in around 1580. However, although the Abbey was closed down and virtually destroyed, the “laity” of Elstow did not go away, so that there was still a requirement for a Church to serve their needs.

But there remains one loose end to this story. Why is the Abbey Church dedicated not just to St Mary, but also to St Helena, mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great?

The answer lies in the fact that in 1272 a man named Ivota, about whom nothing seems to be known beyond his name, built a Chapel in the grounds of the Abbey and dedicated it to her. The Chapel was in fact pulled down, along with most of the Abbey, after the Dissolution. It is this which accounts for the dual dedication of the surviving Church to St Mary as the dedicatee of the Abbey and to St Helena as the dedicatee of the Chapel.

A replica in oak of the Abbey’s Seal, as affixed to the Deed of Surrender, is to be seen placed over the great West Doors of the Church. It depicts the two patron saints. St Mary is holding the Holy Child in her arms, and St Helena has a cross in her hands. Below are figures clearly depicting the pastoral role of the Abbey, with the Abbess, holding a bishop’s crosier, flanked by nuns.

ELSTOW CHURCH – FROM FOUNDATION TO MODERN TIMES

The Convent’s Church, significantly reduced in size, survived the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the devastation inflicted on the Abbey in around 1580. The next section of this website, “Buildings”, gives a fuller account, with photographs, of the interior and exterior of the Church and of the ruins of the Abbey.

Briefly and so far as the architecture is concerned, there are some notable features. The Church as it has survived comprises just a part of the nave of the Abbey’s original Church, a far bigger building. The earliest surviving section, the three easternmost bays, is Norman or “Romanesque” in style and contemporary with the Abbey’s founding, dating therefore from 1078, although some authorities mention 1075 (which, if true, would indicate a surprisingly early interest by the Countess Judith when it came to founding the Abbey). The two “Early English style” western bays were added later, in around 1225, and are a compromise between Romanesque and the more florid later examples of Gothic to be found elsewhere. The small vestry is contemporary with these two western bays and is a particularly fine example of its kind. The Bell Tower, dating originally from the 13th century, was restored some 200 years later and is, today, one of only a few free-standing bell towers in the Country. In order to rectify the

increasing deterioration of the fabric, the Church was most recently substantially restored, starting in 1880.

Inside the Church, there is also much of interest, as in many of the Churches which form our national heritage. Again briefly, here are two principal features:

First of all, it is the Church of the Parish in which John Bunyan (1628-1688) was born, lived and worshipped until his first wife died, young, in 1655 and he moved to Bedford, which is why Elstow is known world-wide as “The Bunyan Parish”. The font in which he was baptised is still in regular use; he played on the village green outside the Church when young; his children by his first wife Mary, of whom the eldest, also Mary (d.1674), was born blind, were also baptised there. He wrote, in his autobiographical “*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*” (written in Bedford Gaol and published in 1666), about his youth at Elstow with its concomitant crises of conscience and, notably, about his bell ringing days in the “*steeple house*” (amusingly, he writes of his fear of the great bells falling on his head – see the section on Bell Ringing, under the “Groups” tab). The windows of the North and South chapels depict “The Holy War” and “The Pilgrim’s Progress” respectively.

A brief summary of his life is given under the “People” tab in this section of the website. A quaint, but reasonably accurate and above all accessible, if rather dated, biography of him is downloadable, free, from <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/freegrace/library/Bunyan/bunyanbiog.html>. There are, of course, many better-researched learned studies available. Students of John Bunyan will recognise the selectivity of the above reference.

Secondly, it is one of the Churches in England which has a memorial chapel dedicated to the Far East Prisoners of War of the 1939-1945 world conflict (the main national memorial is the Church of Our Lady and St Thomas of Canterbury built in 1952 in Wymondham in Suffolk). It is located in the south aisle, appropriately under the window depicting “The Pilgrim’s Progress”. (Bunyan, as is well-known, was a prisoner in Bedford gaol for 12 years.) The altar dedication reads: “*In memory of those who died in prison camps in the Far East 1941-1945 and in thanksgiving for those who returned...*”. To the left, we read, from the end of the second part of “The Pilgrim’s Progress”, Mr Valiant-for-Truth’s words: “*My marks and scars I carry with me to be a witness for me that I have fought his battle who now will be my rewarder*”. To the right, we read, from a few lines later and as Mr Valiant-for-Truth crosses the River: “*So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.*” John Bunyan would have approved.

The Church continues to serve the Parish and to be used for worship in the 21st Century: other parts of this website give details. Broadly speaking, there are services every Sunday with Holy Communion once a week in addition and, of course, baptisms, weddings and funerals as and when. Further, there are all the usual activities that one associates with a progressive Church of England parish.

CHARTER FAIRS

Charter Fairs were established by Royal Charter and offered an annual opportunity to sell and buy goods and produce. They not infrequently lasted several days and, as the years passed, tended to move away from their original objective of boosting trade to becoming an occasion to have a big party. These, not unnaturally, were inclined to degenerate into rowdiness, especially when the consumption of ale and wine was factored in.

Charter Fairs had their heyday in the middle ages but, as the more important trading centres of the towns and cities with their great merchants prospered and expanded, so did the smaller local fairs decline. By the 17th century, they were often just a memory. They are rightly being revived nowadays as betokening a great English tradition.

Many towns, villages and religious foundations enjoyed the privilege of holding one. Henry I's charter (of c. 1126) concerning the granting to Elstow of the right to hold a fair states:

"HENRY, KING OF ENGLAND ... TO THE BISHOP OF LINCOLN, AND THE SHERIFF, AND ALL BARONS OF BEDFORDSHIRE, GREETING. I GRANT TO THE NUNS OF ELNESTOU THAT THEY MAY HAVE ONE FAIR AT ELNESTOU FOR FOUR DAYS, NAMELY, ON THE VIGIL OF THE INVENTION OF THE HOLY CROSS, ON THE DAY OF THE FEAST (3RD MAY), AND TWO DAYS AFTERWARDS..."

The charter goes on to express the desire that it be held peaceably and that all attending should attend safely.

However, it seems that rowdyism reared its ugly head because we have a further charter, of about 1180 and from King Henry (actually Henry II's son and joint ruler with his father), which states, in part, as follows:

"I CHARGE YOU (PROVOSTS AND BURGESSES OF BEDFORD) THAT YOU DO NOT MOLEST, OR PERMIT TO BE UNJUSTLY MOLESTED, MEN COMING TO THE FAIR OF THE NUNS OF ELNESTOU, OR RETURNING THENCE, NOR OFFER THEM ANY INJURY OR INSULT, OR PERMIT THE SAME TO BE OFFERED."

This suggests that things may even then have got out of hand so far as the locals were concerned.

Eventually, the tradition was to wane in Elstow until tentatively revived in 2006 before taking on a real new lease of life in 2007. It has, in the succeeding years, become a major local event – and without the alcohol-fuelled excesses of distant times past....

THE NAME "ELSTOW"

The Myth

A myth once accepted is almost impossible to dislodge, especially if it is plausible. In the case of "Elstow" ↔ "Helenstow", the plausibility is obvious and many have agreed with its doubtful phonetic logic.

In support of this myth, the name ("Helenstow") is found in many places. For instance in 1811 Samuel Lewis, in his *"Topographical Dictionary of England"* writes of "Elstow, church, formerly Helestowe"; or again in 1885 John Brown, in his *"John Bunyan: his life, time and work"*, writes of the "stow or stockaded place of St Helen" and goes on to elaborate, saying that Helenstow "was so called because of the dedication of the old Saxon (*sic*) church to Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great".

And thus – and widely elsewhere – has the myth been perpetuated. For instance, in the Elstow Parish Magazine of April 2009 a contributor wrote: "If we look far enough back we find that Elstow was once called 'Helenstow'. It became shortened to Elstow, and St Helena is of course one of our Patron Saints!"

The Facts

The facts that have come down to us throw serious doubt on these post-reformation usages and on this opinion.

The earliest references to the village and Abbey of Elstow in such as the Domesday Book are to "Elenestowe" (by far the commonest version of the many alternatives on offer such as "Alnestowe", "Alnestou", "Aunestowe", "Elvestowe", "Elmstouwe" "Elnestow", "Elnestowe", "Elnestou" and so forth). In the Dissolution documents of 1539 it is firmly "Elnestowe".

St Helen, or rather St Helena (the distinction is important), is not in fact named in documents until after the Abbey's chapel was built by Ivota in 1272 and the first surviving reference after that, and written in 1281, is to "A[gatha] Prioress of the Church of St Helen of Elnestowe", thus retaining and confirming the ancient name. Ivota had, clearly, had in mind the dedicatee of the original Saxon church of which there are no records beyond its name and existence.

["Helenstowe" (see above) seems to appear only once, in a copy of a charter of Henry I's made in the reign of Edward II (1284-1327). From its context, it is likely to be a clerical error – a common feature of mediaeval transcriptions. Being written a few years after the building of the chapel dedicated to St Helena, the clerk may possibly have been influenced by that chapel's recent dedication.]

The dedication of the Abbey Church, is clearly explained above:

"In 1272 a man named Ivota ... built a Chapel in the grounds of the Abbey and dedicated it to [St Helena]. The Chapel was in fact pulled down, along with most of the Abbey, after the Dissolution. It is this which accounts for the dual dedication of the surviving Church to St Mary as the dedicatee of the Abbey and to St Helena as the dedicatee of the Chapel."

An Academic Stone in the Pond

The Latin name "Helena" seems to have been pronounced with an aspirated "H", whereas the French name "Hélène" (our "Helen") has an unvoiced "H". If the Roman name "Helena" is at issue with its aspirated, and therefore consonantal, "H", then the consonantal transposition involved in transmuting "Elnestowe" to "Helenstowe" is phonetically unlikely. On the other hand, if the French name "Hélène" is at issue with its silent "H", then the vocalic transposition of "Elnestowe" to "Helenstowe" is relatively more likely.

Conclusion

On balance, therefore, given the above and taking the date (1272) of the building of Ivota's chapel into account, it can be maintained with some confidence that the original name of the village and Abbey of Elstow was "**Elnestowe**" with its many variants, and not "**Helenstowe**".

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Footnote

This article owes its existence to many people and sources. These are too numerous to list here. All errors, deductions and conclusions are my own.

However, I am especially indebted to Dr Peter Cunich of the University of Hong Kong, the leading specialist on the topic, for confirming the full details of Elstow's financial situation at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. These details can be summarised as follows:

- a) The Abbey's gross income in 1535-6 was £325 2s 2d. This is a better indication of the Abbey's actual wealth at the time of the Dissolution than the net, or "clear value", figure given in the "*Valor Ecclesiasticus*" of £284 12s 11¾d.

This gross figure was made up from "spiritualities" (impropriated rectories and other 'pensions' from churches) at £184 4s 5d per annum, and a smaller amount in "temporalities" (manors, rents, etc) at £140 17s 9d. The deductions claimed by the abbey included £22 16s 8d in salaries for vicars of the abbey's impropriated rectories and in various pensions to other ecclesiastical corporations, and £17 per annum in fees paid to

laymen working as the abbey's key administrative officials. [For full details, see *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol.4 pp 188-9 (1821 edition).]

- b) The Abbey was, as I have said, only modestly wealthy. Although one of the better-off convents, it was still some way down the list behind the “clear value” (net) figures given for such as Shaftesbury (£1,166), Barking (£862), Amesbury (£535), Romsey (£393), Wherwell (£339).
- c) The nuns would have lived comfortable lives compared with the residents of most smaller nunneries, but the number of sisters at Elstow was quite large so that their standard of living would certainly not have been lavish.
- d) To put all this into a wider context, the wealthiest of the Benedictine monasteries of monks, Westminster Abbey, Glastonbury and Canterbury Cathedral Priory had “clear value” annual income figures in 1535-6 of £3,470, £3,311 and £2,349 respectively.

If I go into so much detail, it is because there is much misleading information given about the wealth of Elstow and it is appropriate for the Abbey’s own website to have the correct figures.