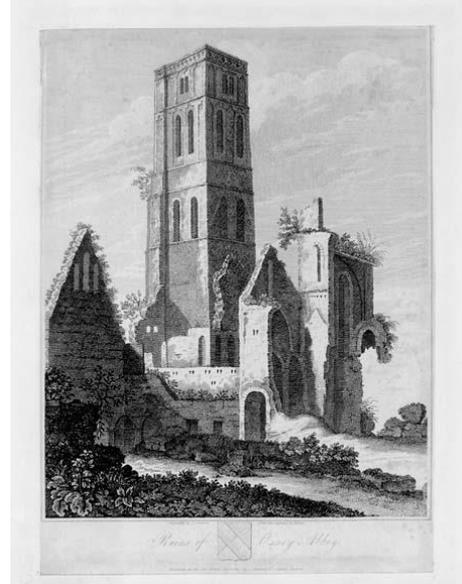


## The Ecclesiastical Manor

### 2. "That ruined house": the Fall of Osney Abbey

In the early 16th century Osney Abbey had holdings in 16 English counties, as well as two churches and land in Ireland. It held the ecclesiastical manor in Hook Norton, and owned about a third of the land in the parish.

After the dissolution of the monasteries, it was dismembered, stone by stone. Its fall was not due to the Reformation, but to the machinations of a monarch.



The Ruins of Osney Abbey by J. Skelton  
after Holler's engraving of 1640<sup>1</sup>  
(c) Oxfordshire History Centre, Ref: D293744a

King Henry VIII, once acclaimed Defender of the Faith by the Pope, had found his dynastic ambitions thwarted by the Catholic church. The Church of England severed its allegiance to Rome, and enabled Henry to divorce and re-marry in the hope of fathering a legitimate male heir. The Act of Supremacy in 1534 declared Henry the head of the Church and his advisers looked towards other reforms. Lack of money led to pressure on the monasteries. This was not new. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey had closed some allegedly corrupt monasteries in 1524 and 1527: their assets had gone partly to the king and partly to further Wolsey's aggrandisement. He founded colleges, one – Cardinal College – in Oxford, incorporating part of the former Priory of St Frideswide, but the building was unfinished when he fell from grace. (It was re-founded by the King as Christ Church College: the remnants of St Frideswide's church became the college chapel, and later Christ Church Cathedral.)

In 1535 Wolsey's protégé, the King's Vicar General, Thomas Cromwell, organised a survey of religious houses: those that had faded into obscurity, with few

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<sup>1</sup> From Alfred Beesley, *History of Banbury*, Banbury, 1841, Vol 7, page 71

members and an income of under £200 a year, were easily suppressed: the monks or nuns were usually given a pension. Religious reforms provoked protest, but the King and Cromwell were undeterred.

While Bishops' Visitations had concentrated on the moral and religious practices of individual institutions, the King's Visitors were more interested in increasing taxation revenue. From the Valor Ecclesiasticus for 1535 or at the recognition of the royal supremacy in 1534, it seems that Oseney had 20 members, more than any other religious house in Oxfordshire.

Whatever his religious allegiances, Dr John London knew how to play the political game: he held four canonries (Lincoln, York, Salisbury, and Windsor); he was dean of the collegiate church of Wallingford, Warden of New College, and Rector of Stanton St. John and Adderbury. He had taken part in the Bishop's Visitation of Oseney in 1520, and was to play a leading role in the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

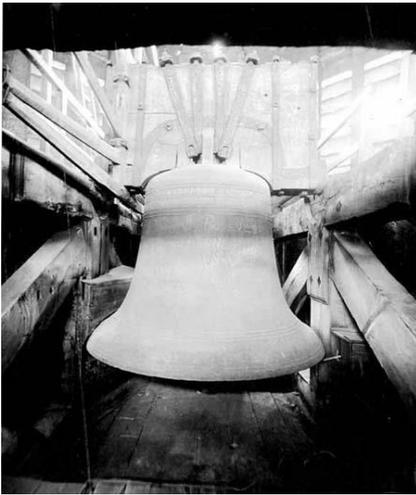
In 1537 the canons of Oseney wrote to Cromwell. The state papers record:

Their abbot died yesterday about 5 p.m. As Cromwell is vicar general and high steward of the monastery, ask him to procure from the King that the new abbot may be one of their brethren. Oseney, 23 Nov.

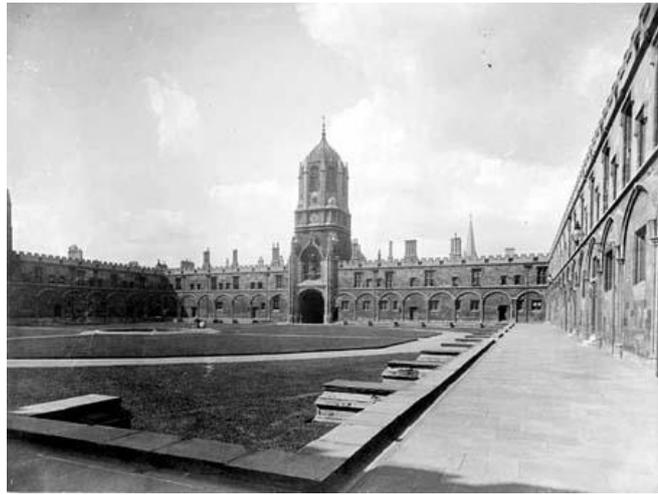
Their request was not granted: instead Cromwell's candidate, Dr Robert King, was elected. London praised the appointment of a man "by whose preferment you have done a great benefit to that ruinous house". Like London, Dr King was a man who balanced personal ambition and religious service. He had been a Cistercian monk at Rewley; became Abbot of Bruern (one of the smaller Abbeys suppressed in 1536), leaving in 1527 to become Abbot of Thame. He was also Suffragan to the Bishop of Lincoln. He seemed unlikely to be a troublesome priest.

Within two years, Robert King would surrender the abbeys of Oseney and Thame to the King. He probably already knew that there was a plan to create a new bishopric in Oxford, with its cathedral at Oseney. In 1542 he was appointed Bishop of Oxford, with his residence at Gloucester College (which subsequently became Worcester College). John London was Dean, and the chapter also consisted of six prebendaries nominated by the King: their residences were to be at Oseney. In

1545 the See was transferred from Oseney to Oxford, and the church of St Frideswide's within Christ Church College became a cathedral church. Oseney was abandoned and plundered for building material, some of which went to Christ Church, particularly its famous peal of bells including Great Tom.



Great Tom of Christchurch,  
Henry Taunt © Oxfordshire History Centre,  
Ref. HT10449



Tom Quad, Christchurch  
Henry Taunt, © Oxfordshire History Centre,  
Ref.HT9302

As Dean, John London persecuted Protestant reformers in Oxford and Windsor. He was involved in a plot against Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, and died in gaol. When Queen Mary came to the throne, Bishop King reverted to Catholicism. He died in 1557 and is commemorated by a stained glass window in Oxford Cathedral.

The destruction of Oseney had less impact on Hook Norton than might be imagined. While most of the lands and income of the Abbey went to King Henry some, including the Abbey's holdings in Hook Norton, went to the new diocese of Oxford. As bishops were appointed by the monarch, there were sometimes long intervals between incumbents while the monarch benefited from the see's tithes and rents – apparently for a total of forty years during the reign of Elizabeth I. The upheavals of the English Civil War and the interregnum led to law suits between claimants to the leased holdings, but when William Talbot was created Bishop of Oxford in 1699, he recovered the former Abbey assets in Hook Norton. The Talbot family were to control the lease for more than 150 years and there was little change

in land ownership or taxes in Hook Norton until the Bishop's Lessee in 1773 (John Chetwynd Talbot) became one of the proposers of the Act for Enclosure which would bring an end to the feudal land ownership systems that had endured for more than 700 years. [See the essay "Enclosure: Winners and Losers" in the [Economic Life](#) section of this website.]

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29 09 2015

### ***Further Reading***

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton*, (Banbury 1928)

John Leland, *The Itinerary of John Leland The Antiquary*. Vol. II. Published from the Original MS in the Bodleian Library By Thomas Hearne M.A. ... The Third Edition.

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Dave Postles, *Oseney Abbey Studies* (Leicester, 2008)

James Bond, "Religious Houses" in *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire*, Oxfordshire Record Society, 2010

Oxoniensia: <http://oxoniensia.org/>

The Victoria County History online: <http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk>

British History Online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk>