

## The Ecclesiastical Manor of Hook Norton

### Oseney Abbey: the richest house in Oxfordshire

From the red-furrowed arable fields of Hook Norton, over the wild open country, went the waggons and horses with the loads of tithe corn to the Abbey barns by the river at Oxford, and from Oseney the canons rode out to their house in Hook Norton, close to the d'Oily mansion, where they could overlook their lands, and see that their vicar was doing his work in the parish.

Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton*<sup>1</sup>

In the west end of Oxford, in Mill Street, a few hundred yards south of the railway station, are a forlorn wall, a Perpendicular arch and some medieval stones in a modern development. These are the ruins of an Augustinian abbey that included among its many possessions considerable property and legal rights in Hook Norton and, as a result, was a major influence in the development of the village for virtually four hundred years - and beyond.



The remnants of Oseney Abbey today

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928), p. 21.

Oseney Abbey was founded in 1129 by Hook Norton's Lord of the Manor, the second Robert d'Oilly, and his wife, Edith Forne. John Leland, a sixteenth-century antiquarian, tells the story:

This Robert began the Priorie of Blake Chanons [Black Canons] at Oseney by Oxford among the Isles that Isis Ryver ther makith.

Sum write that this was the occasion of making of it. Edith used to walk out of Oxford Castelle with her Gentilwomen to solace [for recreation] and that often tymes, wher yn a certen place in a tre as often as she came certen pies [magpies] usid to gether to it, and ther to chattrre, and as it wer to speke onto her. Edithe much marveling at this matier, and was sumtyme sore ferid [afraid] as by a wonder.

Wherapon she sent for one Radulph, a Chanon of S. Frediswides, a Man of a vertuus Life and her Confessor, asking hym Counsel: to whom he answered, after that he had seene the fascion of the Pies Chattering only at her Cumming, that she should builde sum Chirch or Monasterie in that Place. Then she entreatid her Husband to build a Priorie, and so he did, making Radulph the first Prior of it.

Inspired by Ralf's interpretation of chattering magpies as representing restless souls in Purgatory, Edith did indeed instigate the foundation of the priory church of St Mary on Oseney Island.<sup>2</sup>

Although his uncle Robert d'Oilly had been a powerful Norman magnate who had come over with William of Normandy, Robert II d'Oilly struggled to maintain his place at court. Henry I had surrounded himself with new men, but he was willing to propose a political marriage that solved Robert's problems, and perhaps his own. Edith Forne, the king's former concubine and mother of his son Robert fitzRoy, became Robert's wife. Apart from Hook Norton, Robert possessed many other manors and titles, which were augmented by Edith's dower of Claydon. Like many leading men of the age, he had been generous to the Church. He had given tithes in Chastleton to Gloucester and Eynsham Abbeys (both Benedictine houses); property in Oxford was given to the Templars, and the d'Oilly family were benefactors of the Augustinian priory of St Frideswide inside the city wall. Edith herself endowed

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<sup>2</sup> John Leland, "The Itinerary of John Leland", *The Antiquary*, vol. II (1542)

Thame Abbey (Cistercian). Perhaps the couple felt the need to buy themselves advantages in Purgatory and a fast track to Heaven.

Robert d'Oilly and his successors granted Oseney both its site just outside the city wall of Oxford and control of all the churches in their manors. The family continued to make significant gifts of land and, crucially, the right for the Abbey to hold a court for their own tenants independently of the lord of the manor's courts. In 1149 Henry d'Oilly added the collegiate church of St George, built by the first Robert d'Oilly within the castle at Oxford. In about 1154 Oseney Priory was elevated to the status of an abbey. In about 1220 another Henry d'Oilly made a gift to "my most dear chanons [canons] of Oseney" of all the tithes of hay, both of his demesne land, and of the tenants of his fee, in four of his manors (including Hook Norton) "to the susteyng of thoo thynges the which ben necessarye In pitaunces [victuals] and medicynys of brethren i-leyde in the infirmarie" at the Abbey.<sup>3</sup>

With land and churches came income, tithes and power – and controversy.

The growth of scholarship in Oxford enhanced Oseney's importance, though claims that it was instrumental in founding the university itself appear dubious. The Austin [i.e., Augustinian] Canons in Oxford were keen scholars, principally in theology. Abbot Thomas Hooknorton played a leading role in the founding of the College of St Mary for Austin Canons at Oxford which fell into disuse after Henry VIII's reformation.<sup>4</sup> Whatever its relationship with the schools being founded nearby, Oseney's most significant contribution was the letting of halls and chambers, a lucrative business. Church Councils were held at the Abbey: in 1222 there was a great council under Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to discuss Lateran decrees; in 1252 the Benedictines held a council there.

There was also another worldly opportunity. The Abbey became a financial institution, acting rather like a bank. No interest was offered to the citizens who valued the security of depositing money with the canons, but the Abbey profited from investing in property in Oxford. It bailed out Henry II d'Oilly when he got into

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Clark, ed., *The English Registry of Oseney Abbey* (London, 1913), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Archaeologists searching the site for proposed student accommodation at the Frewin Annexe for Brasenose College have uncovered evidence of the lost St Mary's College. BBC News, 1 Feb. 2022.

difficulties: as the fortunes of the barony of Hook Norton faded, Henry had contracted debts and was unable to fulfil his scutage<sup>5</sup> obligations to the king:

And since the said canons wanted to be found neither ungrateful nor mean to me, their patron, in my great need, they have given me three hundred marks and rescued me and my lands from the hard hand of David the Jew of Oxford.<sup>6</sup>

There were ups and downs. Oseney was an excellent training ground. Six canons went to Waltham in 1177; seven years later Oseney provided the abbot as well. In 1213, after the interdict imposed by the Pope on England during King John's turbulent reign, the heads of four religious houses were appointed from Oseney. Between 1225 and 1247, canons from Oseney were elected to the priories of Newenham, Chacombe and Ivychurch and to the abbeys of Dorchester and Owston.

Other reports were not so positive. The Abbey was regularly inspected by the Bishop of Lincoln and sometimes found wanting. At the time of the visitation of February 1499, the Abbey was in debt and the buildings were in poor condition. Cutbacks were required. The Abbot's allowance for clothes, food, and fire was not to exceed 40 marks a year. His personal staff was reduced to a cook and a butler. He was told where to live. Specific budgets for the prior and the canons were introduced. There was to be no wining and dining of strangers on expenses. Canons were not allowed to go into Oxford without very good reasons. The prior was ordered to stay away from taverns and other fleshpots.

The Black Canons were founded to live in scattered community houses near churches endowed to the order: they were not parish priests, but held the advowson, the right to appoint the priest. In Hook Norton, the Abbey held not only the advowson and the right to tithes and other income from the land and buildings granted to them, it also functioned as an independent manor within the parish. Canons became estate stewards, managing Abbey holdings and collecting rents of assize or other receipts from sales or fines. Dickins claims that by its dissolution nearly ten per cent of the Abbey's income came from Hook Norton.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Knights expected to provide military service to the monarch might instead pay compensation in money or something of equivalent value

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Dave Postles, *Oseney Abbey Studies* (Leicester, 2008), pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Dickins, *Hook Norton*, p. 47.

The Abbey's Court Rolls in the Bodleian Library record land transactions, minor misdemeanours and complaints dealt with by the Abbey's court in Hook Norton. The records reveal benefactors among other wealthy landowners within the village, and provide a wealth of information, including the field names of the time.

The Cartulary of Oseney Abbey provides records of the management of its assets, but these are not always complete for individual manors. In his analysis of the Abbey's systems and accounts, Dave Postles quotes, for example, from an undated but probably early 14<sup>th</sup>-century document held at the Bodleian Library: the grange at Hook Norton held one stack of wheat seed reaching above the height of the walls containing by estimate 25 quarters; at the other end of the grange were two stacks of mixed wheat and rye up to the great beams and a third up to the height of the walls containing in all by estimate 55 quarters ... and so on, figures that provide an image of a well-stocked barn of grain and pulses destined for the Abbey's use or profit. According to Postles, Hook Norton also had a flock of wethers only, implying that the Abbey's interest in them was simply for the wool. Given the range of their lands spread throughout several counties, it is not surprising that the Abbey sometimes leased their holdings to "farmers"<sup>8</sup>: John Croker (or Crocker, the spelling varies) is listed as the farmer in Hook Norton in 1530.<sup>9</sup>

The mother house grew impressively. Its buildings included dormitories, refectory, infirmary and chapter-house, seven lodgings, one with its own chapel, the Abbot's lodgings, Abbot John's hall, the guest hall, the great hall with a parlour beneath, a school and schoolmaster's accommodation, rooms for the petty canons, a prison building, the chapel of St. Nicholas and outbuildings. It was said to be the richest house in Oxfordshire but, when Henry VIII cast off England's allegiance to the Pope, Oseney was doomed. "The Fall of Oseney" is the next article in this section.

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<sup>8</sup> A farmer at this time could be a person who paid an agreed sum for the right to collect (and profit from) taxes.

<sup>9</sup> For the Crokers, see "Avoiding a Squire" in the *Reformation, Revolution and Reaction* section of this website.