

## **St Laurence parish and Reading Abbey: the crisis years c1520-c1570**

### **Abbey-parish relations c 1121-1539**

St Laurence more dependent on abbey than any other Reading parish

#### **a. foundation of St Laurence church and parish by abbey**

Soon after 1125 a chapel (St Laurence first documented as a chapel (Astill, 79) probably founded by abbey to serve community which grew up near the new Market Place

**c.1185-6** church of St Laurence. A certain Robert, chaplain of St Laurence was witness to a charter of probably 1185-6 (Kemp, Cartularies, number 704) St Laurence was parish church **by c.1190** or 1200 (Hurry, 172, Kemp, cartularies, II, 124-5). By c.1200 most English parishes had been founded with church, parish boundaries, endowment for incumbent. (Chris Taylor / W G Hoskins; John Blair – minsters.)

**c.1196** building was enlarged probably when the abbey founded St John's Hospital (the Hospitium) abutting the later north aisle of the church. (Astill, 79; Kerry, 13; *VCH*, 370; Pevsner, 448).

**c.1220** a north chapel, St John's Chapel, (and a north aisle) was added to the existing chancel (*VCH*, 373).

#### **b. vicarage: characteristics and significance**

##### **corrody vicarage**

**1200-1213** Abbot Elias made a grant to John, chaplain, their clerk [?cleric/ priest] of a **perpetual vicarage** in church of St L.

**The vicar** would receive from almoner

- twenty shillings a year for clothes,
- bread and wine the same as one of the monks, and seven pence a week for other food,
- decent lodgings,
- for hospitality sixpence or less and
- sixpence in offerings at four feasts: Christmas, the Purification [2 Feb, Candlemas], Easter and St Laurence's feast, [10 Aug] and
- a suitable horse if he is summoned to attend a synod. (Kemp, Cartularies, 124-5, Coates, 199).

So abbey was patron / rector of St L had great tithes of parish - vicar (deputy) had wage / income (see above).

Abbot presented candidate for vicar – inducted by bishop. Kerry lists vicars from 1299. To judge by locative surnames, most were strangers to borough.

Late 15C, some well-educated (two MAs, BLL) vicars. Richard Bedowe (will 1533) and Thomas Justice (1535) either came from families with land (Bedowe) or acquired property (Justice) and both were buried in St L church – a privilege of the wealthy.

## Other links between parish and abbey before 1539:

**1. Chancel/ quire.** Abbey as rector responsible for repairs to fabric of chancel. CWA show parish providing and repairing furnishing eg. stools for cantors (rectors of choir), curtains, altar cloths etc.

**Parish** CW and vestry) responsible for rest of church, providing for religious services, care of church's sacred vessels, furnishing and goods, parish property etc.

**2. monastic gifts** (CW inventories 1503, 1517, 1523) –

1. white damask chasuble with blue velvet orphrey from John Thorne, abbot (2: 1446-86; 1486-1519)
2. red silk cope from Dan / Dom Robert, Redyng, monk
3. abbot Hugh paid rent for his mother's seat (no burial recorded but note no parish register and only burials in church –payment- or tolls in CWA.

**3 parish churchyard:** not really churchyard tho' called this: Abbey had not provided one. Parishioners buried by North wall of abbey church (Charles Kerry, *St Laurence etc*, p201 and Cecil Slade, *The Town of Reading etc* p 29

description of churchyard sheds light on appearance of outer court of abbey:

surrounded by **brick wall:** a/c 1501/2 churchyard wall mended; 1510/11 2s 4d to repair wall of c/yard for 'sendstone', bricke & workmanship;

**grass and nettles:** 1507/8 sub-sexton allowed by vicar to keep nettles he cut down in c/yard; the horse of one of the churchwardens grazed in the c/yard for which he paid into the CW 33s. 5 ½ d

**locked gate** 1507/8 two hinges and a board to c/yard gate, same year a padlock for gate cost 3d and 1526/7 a lock for gate cost 4d;

1512/3 **paved paths:** alleys 'about the churchyard' paved 4s. 8d.

1507/8 access also by **style(s)** 'ferther style made in chyard 8d. and style mended 1513/4, 1515/16 and 1528/9. **Compter Gate** gave access to abbey outer court / Forbury.

4. **Procession way** possibly round church then thro' Compter Gate - 1557-8 M and B p 12d CW for 'one pece of tholde procession waye wyth the chamber over it, and som more buydinge new thereunto sett now used for the gayle called ye grate' (see below)

## Situation early 16<sup>th</sup> century

### Parish in 1530s

**Population 1547** Chantry Certificate: 1,000 houseling people presumed to be communicants over 16. Total pop possibly 1,600 or 1,700.

**Wealth based on tax** – Lay Subsidy 1524 -5. Wealthiest of town's 3 parishes. Total over two taxes: tax on land, goods, wages over £1 per ann

St Laurence	taxpayers 245+	tax	£265 9s 8d *
St Mary	taxpayers 164	tax	£99 9s 10d
St Giles	taxpayers 123	tax	£57 14s 6d
Total borough			£422 14s 0d

- part of St Laurence return 1525 missing
- Reading 10<sup>th</sup> richest (highest tax paid) of recorded provincial towns. A few wealthy individuals paid large amount of tax – Thomas Turner, William Everard and William Wattis pd £46 between them; 58% of taxpayers pd on wages.

### Provision for cure / care of souls

#### 1. Clergy in early 16<sup>th</sup> century

**vicar** Last pre-Reformation vicar, **Sir John Manforth / Maynforth, Maynesforth** (non-graduate) 1534-50.

Unusually for a parish –In the survey of church goods, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus 1535*, the vicarage was assessed as of no value (cf St Mary £11 4s 3d and St Giles £14 17s 0d) - no glebe; no small tithes – tallies with the concept of corrody vicarage pre-dissolution

**Significance** - no income for vicar once abbey dissolved.

**chaplains** of two parish fraternities (one, Name of Jesus and other Our Lady (Mary))

**William Webbe** c 1494-1538 (aged 52, 'decrepit' in Chantry Certificate) income from unnamed chantry in Chantry Cert.

**Richard a Deane** : (aged 39 in 1547) salary from Jesus Mass (parish gild / fraternity of Holy Name of Jesus founded by Henry Kelsall 1487 ) property – tenement in Mkt Place; two on N side New (Friar) St; tenement, garden and two cottages in Gutter Lane.

**Chaplains** / chantry priests were unbeneficed clergy cf Wm Langland, Piers Plowman, - sang Masses for deceased – Mass offerings in wills eg William Melvyn als Stanford 1516: £6 for two years for priest to say Mass in St L church; Richard Turner 1546 obit (annual memorial mass) every year for 20 years for his and all Christian souls at 3s 4d each time;

they probably said weekly Mass for members (alive and dead) of fraternities at their altars

Is it significant that no priest left bequest to abbey; neither did other parish will-makers of the period

**vicarage: house.** 1552 Amyce Survey of Reading – tenement called the Vicarage at East end New (Friar St) and owner given as vicar of St L. This is post- dissolution but poss could be same house as pre-Ref - see map

(inventory of John Mansforth d 1550 ) - hall (main living/ dining room), parlour (bedroom), next chamber (2 beds), kitchen, buttery. If so, it was the 'suitable' house provided by abbey but ? owned by vicar or poss parish because CW provided accommodation for clergy after 1550

?not seized with other abbey property – poss seen as essential for the cure of souls

#### 2. Church

1. Splendid provision for parochial worship – multiple copies of service books for celebrant and choir, multiple sets of vestments for Mass and other liturgical dress in rich fabrics; service vessels of silver, silver-gilt - chalices, candlesticks, a pyx, censers a pax etc; two organs, several altars.
2. Richly decorated church – stained glass, statues.

**Connection** between wealth in parish and splendour of liturgy: donations – eg 14 of 20 pieces of plate – chalices, censers, candlesticks etc donated; and 13 of 19 copes of damask, velvet, satin and baudikin (satin and gold thread) donated.  
eg

Richard Cleche - donated silver incense boat and 2 candlesticks

William Stanford - silver chalice and great book of music for the Mass;

Richard Turner , - a processional

Richard Smith, in royal household, borough MP – copes, sets of vestments, altar frontals.

3. **parish income** (as opposed to vicar's) before 1540s – between £15 and £23 a year; some years during Reformation much higher because sales of church plate in previous years but expenses greater eg 1548-9 income over £46; expenses nearly £35
  - a. **rents from property** in CWA (also appear in 1552 Amyce Survey) two tenements on S side New / Friar St; two tenements on North; shop in Mkt Place, stable in Gutter Lane could reach £3 dropped by half in 1530s
  - b. **'gatherings'** (collections) at major feasts – All Saints (1 Nov), Christmas, Easter. usually over £3 until 1544.  
In 1530s and 1540s, money from gatherings more important as rents fell.
  - c. **social activities:** plays, church ales, Hocktide – income varied but could reach £5 (1512/3 and 1540/41)
  - d. **payments** for seat rents, burials in church, tolling / knells (varied)
  - e. **Contribution** of parish gilds to sexton's wages £3 6s 8d pa from 1512-1543

**Crises for parish** resulting from dissolution of abbey:

1. Loss of vicar's income 1538-9
2. loss of graveyard;
3. upkeep of chancel.

**Crises resulting** from royal injunctions and parliamentary legislation:

1. dissolution of chantries / parish gilds – loss of clergy and income; 1547
2. ending of social activities – loss of income, popular culture and social cohesion;
3. ongoing crises from imposition of new doctrines and forms of worship
4. impact of national demographic and economic crises.

**Effect on clergy: vicar, chantry priests**

1. vicar: endowment for vicar ceased at dissolution so no income. Patron / rector now Crown. John Mansforth died autumn 1550.
2. Until 1547, chantry priests had income, then pensions. Webbe earned money by saying the 'morrow mass' and with a Deane did other jobs such as copying out music. Parish paid wages to keep Wm Webbe and Rd a Deane in parish and also employed Sir John Harper, former Reading monk 10 s wages 1547-8 and 40s 1551/2.  
So parish having to provide what rector / patron should have (Crown: bad patron / lord)

Imposition of BCP 1549 and 1552 and marriage of clergy changed situation. Thomas Thackham, former master of Rdg School and married (paid for wife's seat in church 1553-4) in post 1552 -4.

Mary Tudor 's Injunctions removed married priests so Thackham removed – would not leave wife

Crown presented Thos Greneway to living – he refused.

Parish employed Wm Webbe whole years 1556-8

Wm Webbe will died 1558. Will Sept 1557- RC £4 part on funeral, dirges and masses and part for poor; 4d to St Laurence church; Jn More of St Giles to choose some of his books to value 10/-

1550 Richard a Deane left for post at Wallingford owing 42s 6d to parish.

After 1558, succession of clerics – ministers, curates – for weeks at a time.

1560s parish tried to get endowment from Eliz I for vicar; John Radley, baker, (CW 1553-4) prominent in campaign. Apparently succeeded.

Radley was married (wife Eliz) and a layman presented to cure by Eliz 1565. Served until 1574.

### **New graveyard and Compter Gate**

May have been little security in abbey precinct after dissolution. Could explain why

**1540/1** CW paid 15d for 45 ft of timber for styles in churchyard at 3 ft for 1d and 2s 6d for 26 ft timber at 1d foot for posts ? protection for graveyard now abbey dissolved.

**NB** 1538/9 a/c CW pd 8d for carrying desks out of abbey church – no record of payment for desks.

**Compter Gate** first mentioned in a/c in 1550/1 (ie year after Duke of Somerset acquired site of abbey and demolition of abbey) when CW received 12d yearly rent for 'the Gaole called the grate' but often just called 'the grate'.

Following year, 1551-2 tenant named as mayor and burgesses. In 1567/8 a/c identified as 'the grate by S. Larance church', (same rent, 12d).

So seems to be the prison over the Compter Gate which I presume was the route taken by parishioners to reach the graveyard by abbey church even after dissolution of abbey. Most of church and conventual buildings outer stone structure itself survived after demolition in 1549 which was undertaken mainly for the lead (about 450 tons, melted and cast on site), copper, roof timbers, c. 13,000 floor tiles and 13,000 house tiles, interior furnishings, images, stained glass and some dressed stone etc (Henry Hawthorne (carpenter of St L) bought 100 olde laths for 4s).

Presumably St Laurence's dead still buried in former graveyard by abbey church – not satisfactory. (no par reg so ? numbers)

August 1556 in recompense for former churchyard 'lying next unto the late Church of the late Monastery there and from the seid inhabitantes taken', Mary I and Philip gave 'Certayne grounde' next to parish church to make churchyard, to be enclosed by a wall.

Parish to bear the cost of the wall. Cost was seven shillings per perch (18 feet). Land was on north and east of church; length of wall 26 ½ perches = 159 yards and cost £15 9s.

List of contributors is roll call of the wealthy men of the parish and leading Reading burgesses headed by then mayor, John Bell, a past and a future mayor, William Edmunds and Thomas Turner.

### **Effect on parish finances**

**Rents** had to provide most of parish income after fell 1540s - generally a difficult time in borough and nationally period of debasement of coinage and political uncertainty – flu epidemic 1557-9 Rents then rose to about £5 in late 1560s

**Gatherings** continued at Easter 1548-53 but not Xmas and both under Mary 1553-9. Easter gathering survived in different name ‘hed pence’ instead of ‘ for the paschal’ and still paid to CW – paid as before by communicants at Easter

**Social activities.** Last Hock tide 1547-8 but back 1554- and May Day back 1556-7. Revived 1555 in Mary’s Restoration but ended 1558 (church ales lasted longer in some rural parishes eg Childrey to 1594)

By 1559 (Eliz 1558-) old customs and with them a popular culture disappeared and CW lost income.

### **Effect on forms of worship** – reaction to religious changes shown in CWA

Henry VIII - 1539 Great Bible bought; 7 processionales (English form of Litany)

Edward VI – 1547-8 books of psalms (Eng), 1549 BCP, 6 psalters, ‘pricking new songs’ old service books defaced, 1552 two copies 2<sup>nd</sup> BCP & bread and wine purchased.

Sale of vestments and church plate:

1537-8 much plate already sold (over £20 ) and 1544-5 (over £25);

1547-8 more plate (over £47); 1550/1 for 4 vestments sold at 10s each 40/-; v few mentions of sale of vestments

Destruction of ‘papist’ fixtures – 1547-8 statues, 1549-50 altars pulled down and sold; Easter sepulchre dismantled; ?stained glass?; wall paintings covered in lime wash.

‘New quire’ ie table not altar.

Marian Restoration – parish restored as much as feasible given shortage of income and time (only 1553-8). High altar returned, hallowed by bishop, one or two statues, Mass books (probably still Sarum tho’ Council of Trent had abolished all local rites)

Elizabethan Reformation - 1558-9 CW bought Bible, BCP; 1559-60 Book of homilies, books of metric psalms

1559-60 Altars pulled down and replaced by table and seats; 1561 rood loft dismantled.

As if this was not enough, Henry’s debasement of coinage, bad or v bad harvests 1549-51 and 1555-7; flu epidemic 1557-9 . Divine retribution? but for which dispensation?

However St Laurence parish survived despite several bad years.

The borough gained what it had long wanted; partially in 1542 but triumphantly in 1560 with the charter from Elizabeth I which would determine the borough’s government for two and a half centuries.

