

Tewkesbury Abbey

Fine and almost complete example of a Romanesque abbey church

Pre-dates Reading. Dedicated in 1121, the year of Reading's foundation. Look out for anniversary events at Tewkesbury in 2021.

But some important and interesting links to Reading

Both were Benedictine

Founder Robert Fitzhamon (honour of Gloucester), friend of Rufus, supported against Robert Curthose. At his death in the New Forest. Then loyal to Henry I – campaigned in Normandy against supporters of Curthose and died doing so in 1107.

Fitzhamon's heiress Mabel married Robert of Gloucester d 1147, the first and most favoured illegitimate son of Henry I, who was a key supporter of his half sister Matilda

Granddaughters were coheiresses – but one of them Hawise (or Isabella of Gloucester) married Prince John. Despite annulment, Tewkesbury became a royal abbey

Later passed to the de Clares. Earls of Gloucester and Hereford. And made their mausoleum

Richard III de Clare (grandson) married Joan of Acre, daughter of Edward I

Again co heiresses in the early 14th C. the eldest Eleanor married Hugh Despenser the younger, favourite of Edward II, executed 1326. She is instrumental in making Tewkesbury into a Despenser mausoleum (significant rebuilding and splendid tombs)

Her great grandson Thomas Despenser marries Constance of York granddaughter of Ed III. A strong link with Reading abbey here as she was buried there in 1416

The Despenser line also ended up with an heiress Isabella who married in turn two men called Richard Beauchamp, the first Richard Beauchamp lord Abergavenny a great friend of Henry V who created him earl of Worcester: but Richard died in the French wars in March 1422; and then his half cousin Richard Beauchamp earl of Warwick, also prominent in the wars in France.

And a link with reading again since Isabella was a regular visitor to the shrine of our lady at Caversham and the well of St Anne (we have details of her journeys up the Thames). And surely also came to Reading abbey because of its important relic.

But unlike Reading, the abbot of Tewkesbury accepted Henry VIII's act of Supremacy, and did well out of it, becoming bishop of Gloucester. And unlike Reading, the church of the abbey of Tewkesbury survived because it was bought by the local inhabitants in 1543. If only the Friends of Reading Abbey had existed then....

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The earliest known reference to Tewkesbury is in Domesday book but the entries there show already that there was an important church since 20 of the 95 hides of the place were in the hands of 'the church' (these included local villages such as Stanway). Such a level of wealth would suggest that this was a 'minster church' like that of St Mary Butts in Reading. Many such minsters were founded in

the eighth century: this was certainly a tradition which developed at Tewksbury. The Founders Book, an important history of the abbey written by a monk of the abbey in the early sixteenth century, claimed that it was founded in 715 CE by Oddo and Doddo. These names might sound a bit suspicious but in fact there was a Doddo who possibly founded a church at Tewkesbury in the early eighth century and we are on firmer ground with Oddo/Odda who was earl of the region in the late Anglo-Saxon period. He died in 1056 at Deerhurst (where we are going this afternoon and where in addition to the monastery founded there in 8th c we can see a chapel he had erected in 1056 to the honour of the trinity and in memory of his brother) and was buried at the already existing Benedictine abbey of Pershore. Deerhurst is right on the northern edge of its parish and so it has been suggested that a new parish of Tewksbury had been carved out of the bigger parish of Deerhurst and a church built at Tewksbury by Odda in land to the south of the actual AS settlement (called Oldbury) nearer the crossing of the Avon. So it is most likely a late Saxon foundation (or a refoundation?) but not monastic. We can't prove it fully but it was most likely on the site of the abbey church: excavations there in the south transept in the 1970s revealed a pre Norman wall. But what's important to remember here is that there was no other parish church in Tewksbury (a contrast with Reading) so the people of the town used the abbey church from its foundation and it is therefore easy to explain why they were keen to buy it in 1543.

By 1086 Tewksbury was already an embryonic town with 13 burgesses in Domesday Book. Before the conquest it had been held by Beohtric a significant Gloucestershire landholder who lost his estates at the conquest (a later tradition developed that he was buried in what later became the abbey – Leland claimed to see his tomb. Maybe some similarity here with creation of saxon royal burials at Winchester to give a pedigree). It seems to have been given to William the Conqueror's queen Matilda: Domesday tells us she founded a market there. But since she died in 1083 it was possible for William Rufus in 1087 to give Tewksbury as part of a great bloc of lands (the honour of Gloucester) previously held by Beohtric to his supporter (some say his lover!) Robert Fitzhamon. Robert's family came from near St Lo in Normandy and had already done well out of the conquest (his father had been sheriff of Kent) and now he was to profit from it, all the more so as it was he who extended Norman control into south wales and so also got lands there. And influenced like many other Normans by the great Benedictine monastic expansion in the duchy he too founded an abbey – Tewksbury.

The traditional date of foundation is 1102. It is important to note that Fitzhamon brought in a ready-made group of monks with an abbot Gerald from a pre-existing (founded in 980) Benedictine monastery at Cranbourne in Dorset – a place which had also been held by Fitzhamon's Anglo-Saxon predecessor Beohtric and which thenceforward right to the Dissolution was a dependent cell of Tewksbury Abbey with a prior and a couple of monks only. It is possible/likely that Tewksbury had already been developed as a cell of Cranbourne (reusing the AS church) but then Fitzhamon with consent of the church authorities, had the relationship between the two houses changed.)

The first buildings were the eastern end of the church, the crossing, the transepts and the first two bays of the nave and presumably some accommodation for the monks. The exact date of building is unclear (perhaps even by 1102 because of the transfer argument) but by 1105 we have documentary evidence of the presence of 57 monks and the setting up of estates linked to specific offices (as was common in Benedictine houses). Henry I confirmed possessions in 1106.

Robert Fitzhamon died in 1107 in Normandy but like Henry I he was brought back for burial in the monastery he had founded. He was buried in the chapter house.

The abbey was consecrated in 1121. By then it was complete save for the upper stretches of the central tower (which ended up at 148 feet virtually the same as Peterborough). The length of the church as built by that point was 306 feet. Reading is believed to be 350 feet.

(some other comparisons: Nave: Tewksbury c180 feet, Reading 200 feet. Crossing T 40 feet Reading 75; choir T 85 Reading 90

Some western towers might have been planned too (that's based on a study of the thickness of the western wall) but at the end of the day only two small turrets were built. I think that is what happened at Reading too. So I think we can argue for a building which must have looked quite like Reading abbey, with an ambulatory at the east end (though this was the bit remodelled in the early 14th C). The Romanesque nave and crossing was never altered so what you are going to see is truly Norman (only significant parallels are Norwich and Peterborough). And look out in particular for the magnificent west end. Although its window was redone in 17th C the huge opening – a triumphal arch as it has been described – is the original Norman with 6 or 7 layers to the arch (it's been suggested that Fitzhamon wanted to create an imperial feel for his church, with influences even from Charlemagne's great church at Aachen).

As I said the local population were always using the nave: the monastic area stretched out from the choir to the second bay of the nave and was marked by a pulpitum or screen. Reading had a deeper crossing so seems that divide was within the crossing.

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The link between the abbey and an influential personage continued into the next generation since Fitzhamon's daughter married Robert the illegitimate son of Henry I, who was created the first earl of Gloucester in 1122. Like his father in law he was keen to maintain the importance of Tewksbury Abbey but also to have his own monastery where he could be buried: so in 1129 he founded a Benedictine priory of St James Bristol (Whitson St, close to Horsefair one of the main shopping streets; now a RC church) where he was buried, but made it a cell of Tewksbury Abbey. Both he and his son Earl William gave the town of Tewksbury privileges. And you can see why the marriage in 1189 of the youngest son of Henry II, Prince John, to William's sister and heir, Isabella of Gloucester, was seen by his father as such a good way of giving John lands and title. So much so that he came to a deal to hold on to them when, once king, he had the marriage annulled in order to marry Isabella of Angoulême. We know John came to Tewksbury abbey several times, as he did to Reading abbey. Tewksbury remained a royal haunt under Henry III and Edward I: the latter took the homage of Alexander III king of Scotland there in 1278, and it was obviously a good spot from which to invade Wales!

But the abbey did not remain in royal hands once John and Isabella of Gloucester were dead. It passed to the descendants of her sister Amice who had married Richard de Clare, earl of Hertford. So the Clares became earls of Gloucester, and Tewksbury became their mausoleum. Four male de Clares and one female were buried there between 1230 and 1314: the last Gilbert III had been killed at Bannockburn in 1314 but his body was brought back to the abbey. All of them were buried in the choir in the area below the high altar. But no tombs survive, only the indent of the brass of his wife Maud who died around 1320.

Under the Clares we see the first new building (save for repairs after a fire in 1178): in the 1230s two new rectangular chapels (St James and St Nicholas) off the north transept (the original Norman apsidally ended chapel is still in south transept: note Reading's extensions of chapels off transepts seem to be part of the original building) – now the shop (worth visiting anyway not least for the excellent book on the abbey edited by Richard Morris and Ron Shoesmith). And a new altar slab in 1239 when the church was rededicated to the BVM and when the body of the founder was brought into the church to the left side of the high altar from (have you remembered?) (Some evidence of development of a relic collection here too, based on gifts from Isabel incl the base of the Cross. The altar slab was taken out in time of Oliver Cromwell but rediscovered and returned later.)

The inheritance passed through Gilbert III de Clare (who died at the battle of Bannockburn) to his sister Eleanor, who married Hugh Despenser the younger. But the title earl of Gloucester could not pass through the heiress so went back to the crown. But don't forget it because it was still deemed important to the abbey and to the Despenser inheritors as we shall see).

Clearly Eleanor was quite a personality as it is with her we see a plan for a major remodelling of the choir, no doubt to make Tewksbury more modern/up to date and to ensure its suitability as what was now the Despenser (but also through her still the Clare) mausoleum. All the Despensers were buried there as were their spouses, and the second husbands of those spouses! Having gathered up all the bits of her first husband Hugh Despenser (since he had been quartered and dispersed) in 1330 she had a tomb built for him in the choir side of the ambulatory. (It's not clear what tomb her second husband William lord Zouche of Richard's castle, d. 1337, got but he was buried at Tewksbury too though moved by the last abbot to Forthampton, SW of Tewkesbury, where the abbots had a country residence – building there still contains a hall built in 1380). Her son Hugh Despenser III, a war hero with Edward III, also got a tomb at the opposite side of the choir in 1350 thanks to his wife Elizabeth (if you can picture it, his is at the 10am position and his father's at the 2 pm position either side of the altar). His wife went on to marry Sir Guy de Brian and she gave him a fine tomb too opposite that of herself and her first husband: all three are there as effigies.

This was part of a bigger remodelling of the choir which can be dated to 1322-49 in two phases – decorated style. Look out particularly for the splendid heraldic windows in the choir clerestory showing the families from Fitzhamon to Robert son of Henry I, the three Clare lords, Despenser the younger, which probably dates to 1340s. There is lots of other heraldic glass- generally with connections to the families but also seems to be something distinctive in Gloucs – see Crecy window at Gloucester of c 1350). Look too upwards to the new style vaulting which replaced the Norman vaulting. And look down since the tiles have been dated to the 1320s and were no doubt part of the modernisation.

Also every self respecting Benedictine abbey needed a lady chapel. Reading's was built 1314 and was 75 feet long: Tewkesbury's 1315-28 at 72 feet. It was pulled down at the Dissolution but you can walk round its foundations.

The Despensers did not stop there. Edward Despenser (nephew of Hugh III) who died in 1375 was a close associate of the Black Prince. His will expressed his desire to be buried on the south side near the bodies of my ancestors. His wife Elizabeth Burghersh gave him a cage chantry chapel sometime before her death in 1409, though she herself preferred to be buried in the choir close to her son. This chapel – the Trinity chapel since it contains a trinity painting (similar to that on the tester above the Black prince at Canterbury cathedral) with Edward and Elizabeth - is truly remarkable and the

most up to date monument you could have in the late fourteenth century. And look out for the fashionable kneeling effigy of Edward on the top of it. Recumbent was old hat.

But even better was to come for the Despencers. Thomas, the son of Edward and Elizabeth, really made it as a favourite of Richard II, marrying Constance of York, the king's cousin, and being created earl of Gloucester in 1397. At last the lordship of Tewkesbury and this title were reunited. What better way to celebrate than an appeal to history: Abbot Parker erected a cage style chantry chapel on the other side to match the Trinity chapel and had the body of the founder Fitzhamon moved into it (so it is known as the founder's chapel). Unfortunately the Despenser success was shortlived since the new Earl Thomas rebelled against Henry IV in 1400 and was executed. No splendid tomb for him then, though it is thought he had a memorial brass. His widow Constance of York as we heard chose to be buried in Reading abbey.

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The last male Despenser died in 1414 so again we have an heiress Isabella. She was the one who married two Richard Beauchamps. Useful if you have a tendency to forget your husband's name. She was responsible for another splendid two-storey chantry (which she put next to the founder's chapel), known rather misleadingly as the Warwick chapel since it is to her first husband, baron Abergavenny who had been created Earl of Worcester by Henry V and who died in France at the siege of Meaux in 1422 but was brought back for burial. The structure probably dates to 1423 although some have argued for 1438. It is as you will see truly splendid but also interesting in its now mainly lost figures which represented all of the families of the past from Robert son of Henry I onwards. Again this emphasis on continuity despite changes through heiresses. She also planned her own tomb, asking for an image all naked – ie the fashionable transi style, endowing six additional monks to pray for her. Alas this is lost: there is another shrouded transi monument supposedly linked to the last abbot but there is some dispute on this.

Isabella obviously had fond memories of Tewkesbury abbey since she had married her first husband there in 1411. But it was to the offspring of her second Richard (who is buried in St Mary's Warwick) that the interest in the Abbey fell. Their son Henry died in 1446 and is buried in the choir (though no tomb). But again we ended up with an heiress, Anne Beauchamp, who married an even more famous Richard, Richard Neville earl of Warwick popularly known as Warwick the Kingmaker. We can trace his interest in and patronage of the abbey from 1451: it was important for these inheritors to emphasise their links with the old families and we find him confirming charters of the Clares, Despencers and even of Fitzhamon.

But now we are in the Wars of the Roses. And Warwick the kingmaker, having helped to put the Yorkist Edward IV on the throne then rebelled against him and was killed at the battle of Barnet on 14 April 1471. The Lancastrians led by Queen Margaret tried to redeem the situation: she marched north from her landing at Weymouth to reconnoitre with Jasper Tudor who was recruiting in Wales, but they were intercepted at Tewkesbury where battle was given on 4 May: the Lancastrians adopted a position with their backs to the abbey. But after the defeat Edward IV gave thanks in the abbey and had Margaret's son prince Edward buried in the choir (unmarked), and other lords in the north transept (the duke of Somerset is supposedly buried under the till!) and others (the less elevated) in the nave. (links to my research on what happened to battle dead. Were there any grave pits ever?)

Warwick the kingmaker only had daughters. The elder Isabella was married to George duke of Clarence, Edward IV's next eldest brother. Their close link with the Abbey is in evidence since she gave birth to her son Richard in 1476 in the infirmary, but alas both mother and son died shortly afterwards and were buried in the Abbey (lost but payments of £373 known). Two years later her husband was murdered but brought back to Tewkesbury for burial. However, the bones in the so-called Clarence crypt behind the high altar have been shown to be of a much older couple than Clarence and his wife. Isabella's sister Anne was the widow of Prince Edward who had been defeated at the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, so she had a link and was soon to get another by marriage to Richard, duke of Gloucester, Edward IV's youngest brother who usurped the throne in 1483 as Richard III. Fortunately there is nothing I need to say about Richard III and Tewkesbury Abbey (though he had fought at the battle in 1471 so definitely had been inside it!)

Anne Beauchamp, Warwick the kingmaker's wife, did not die till 1492 but resigned her interest in Tewkesbury to Henry VII in 1486 in return for a pension. The abbey was therefore royal for the last fifty years or so of its existence. Henry VIII visited it with Thomas Cromwell 23-27 July 1535. (He had travelled there via Reading Abbey where he was to 12 July.)

In the Valor Ecclesiasticus of 1535 Tewkesbury's annual income was valued at £1,598 10s 3d including its dependencies of Cranborne, St James Bristol and Deerhurst – which had become a cell in 1446 (or 1469 – had been granted to St Denis so suffered the fate of alien priory). Reading was valued at £1938 14s 3d. Like Reading Abbey Tewkesbury was one of the Greater Monastic Houses and therefore dissolved as a result of the act of 1539. When handed over on 9 January 1540 it had 39 monks (including those at the dependencies) with 144 servants. It has been possible to trace what happened to most of them: most got posts including one as vicar of Cranbourne, three at St James Bristol and one at Deerhurst, all having become parish churches (nb St James Bristol only the nave was saved for the parish – agreement 1374 between abbot and parishioners that they would be responsible for the nave, tower added about same date as part of this arrangement. The chancel became a private house). And Abbot Wakeham got the bishopric of Gloucester set up on 3 Sept 1541.

A survey of the buildings at Tewkesbury was carried out immediately after the surrender, and decisions taken on keeping the useful buildings (assigned to remain undefaced – the abbots lodging, the Brewhouse, barns etc) but destroying the buildings 'deemed to be superfluous' – the church, cloisters, chapter house, refectory, dormitory. The Cloisters were as elegant with their fan vault as those in Gloucester : you can see a trace of them left along with footings of the other monastic buildings. Although the lady chapel was demolished the church survived by being purchased by the townspeople in 1543 for £483 (about 25% of the annual income of the abbey in the Valor Ecclesiasticus).

However until the work of Sir George Gilbert Scott in the late 1870s the parish church occupied really only the choir to the second bay of the nave as the old pulpitum had been kept in place. Maybe a pity it was removed as with it we could have seen how an abbey church was used by both monks and people.

Another similarity with Reading incidentally was that there was no charter of incorporation for the town till after the Dissolution: Tewksbury in 1575, Reading in 1542 and 1560.

Sources for Tewksbury abbey

Annals and Cartulary 1066-1233 – made in 13th C

The Founders Book early 16th C, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford – includes fascinating illustrations

R. Shoesmith, *Tewksbury Abbey: History, Art and Architecture* (2003). Collection of excellent essays with plans and illustrations

Deerhurst

Earliest masonry from 8th C. connections with Athelmund (ealdorman of the Hwicce killed in battle 802) and Aelfric or Aethelric (who was offa's representative sent to Rome). Gave lands to it 804. Nave and part of west porch are of that date (latter later made into a tower)

A monastery with a famous monk Alphege 953-, later archbishop of Canterbury killed by Danes 1012. Location of treaty between Ironside and Cnut 1016

Given by Ed the Confessor to St Denis – and so it appears in Domesday. So suffered as an alien house and lands given to Eton. But it became a cell of Tewkesbury 1446/69. Stained glass incl a St Alphege of c 1450, coat of arms in the tracery is de Clare, with sun in splendour the badge of York.

After dissolution a house built on east side of cloister

Also Odda's chapel now part of farmhouse. Stone discovered which shows Odda ordered it to be built in honour of the trinity and in memory of his brother who died there in 1053, dedicated 12 April 1056

Wightfield manor built with stone from Deerhurst priory