

## *The Abbey and St Æthelwold*

Abingdon Abbey was ranked in the later middle ages as among the great English abbeys, but the time when it was most influential in English Church life was during the abbacy of Æthelwold, from perhaps the late 940s to 963, when he became Bishop of Winchester. During these years, the abbey was transformed from a neglected minor community to a rich and powerful establishment. In this period of intensive activity, Abingdon Abbey was at the heart of the reform of Benedictine monasticism in England. Its liturgical and community life, informed by the best Continental practice, brought advanced architecture, craftsmanship in precious metals, music and liturgical drama to the life of the abbey. Civil engineering harnessed the power of the Thames for the economic life of the Abbey and town. The Abbey brought the treasures of the wider world and the most advanced thinking of the day to the town.

Because early mediaeval chronicles often conflated history with legend, the earliest origins of the Abbey are difficult to discern with any certainty. Scholars are however agreed that there was a late seventh-century monastery of St Mary at Abingdon founded by the West Saxon king Caedwalla (685—8), endowed with the estate (*rus*) known as *Abbindun*, and under the leadership of Abbot Hæha (or Hean). One of the most important pieces of evidence for the life of this early community was the ‘Black Cross of Abingdon’ revered as being a nail from the True Cross and associated with the tradition of a 7<sup>th</sup>-century nunnery at Helenstow and an early Saxon minster dedicated to St Helen, the mother of the Emperor Constantine and credited with the discovery of the True Cross. A thirteenth-century Abingdon manuscript described its discovery in the tenth century by Æthelwold’s monks, and the Cross took the form of the type of open-work disk-headed pin found on several sites of the late 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. The presence of a monastic community would in any event have accorded with Abingdon’s status as a centre for royal administration in Anglo-Saxon times.

When the Danes sacked Abingdon in 871, they destroyed the church but the monks’ cells and chapels survived until Æthelwold refounded the monastery. The community had already been secularised, with priests living in separate houses and drawing on separate incomes. Æthelwold, generally regarded as the most austere of the three great reformers (along with St Dunstan and St Oswald) of the era, made it his priority to re-establish the monastic community under the Rule of St Benedict. An Abingdon chronicler recounted that his reputation for holiness attracted ‘men from various parts of England ... to follow a stricter mode of life’. Even so, Æthelwold was gratefully remembered for mitigating the strictest provisions of the Rule. The reform was inspired by the example of the great French monasteries under the influence of Cluny, particularly Fleury, and the monastery at Corbie provided monks who taught the rules of chanting and reading.

In addition to his reputation for holiness, Æthelwold was also remembered as an adept craftsman. He is said to have made with his own hands a pair of organs and two bells. (He would not have been unique in this way: his successor as abbot, Sparhavoc (*c.* 1047—*c.* 1050) was a king’s goldsmith.) Æthelwold was also credited with the manufacture of a golden-plated wheel supporting twelve lamps and numerous small bells as well as a rich *tabula super altare* or retable of gold and silver and enriched with sculptured figures of the twelve apostles. In addition to these skills should be added those of a civil engineer, as the monks under Æthelwold dug the

mill-stream adjoining the Thames to power the water-mill that ground the grain from the monastery's extensive land holdings.

Of all of the abbot's building projects, however, the most important was the monastic church, for this was the setting for the *opus Dei*, the liturgy that was the heart of the monastic life. We have only tantalizing hints of the church he would have built. A description from around 1200 says, 'The chancel was round, the church was round and twice as long as the *cancellus* and the tower was also round.' Richard Gem and Martin Biddle have argued that Æthelwold's church was an important link in a chain of architectural influence from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (in Greek the *Anastasis*) in Jerusalem, Charlemagne's palace chapel at Aachen, the apsidal abbey churches at St Riquier and Corbie, and Æthelwold's subsequent Old Minster at Winchester. The proportions at Aachen and Winchester are precisely modelled on those of the *Anastasis*, the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem, thereby intending to incorporate the holiness of the place of Christ's resurrection into these far-distant churches. The description of the 'round' church in Abingdon, interpreted as a tower-like rotunda with surrounding ambulatory evoking the tomb of Christ and with an apsidal chancel to the East, in the context of the community's devotion to the Black Cross relic, makes a coherent whole within this tradition.

Although the architectural details of Æthelwold's church at Abingdon may be uncertain, we have a richly developed account of the liturgies that took place within it. Æthelwold himself compiled the *Regularis Concordia*, a codification of the liturgical use for the monastic houses of England. The influences of Corbie and St Riquier are evident; these abbeys were notable for the presence of many altars at different levels within the church and the extensive use of many processions to the various altars and with special prayers to be used at each station focussing on the core beliefs of the Christian faith. In this way, a locational memory was woven into the very architecture of the monastic buildings.

The richness of the tradition achieved its fullest expression at the climax of the Christian year in the ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter. The events of Christ's passion and death and resurrection were enacted in a building that in all likelihood was built to bring the presence of the tomb of Christ to Abingdon itself. The cross of Christ venerated by the monks on Good Friday was 'buried' in a special sepulchre and guarded by them until Easter. During the services of Easter Day, the *Visitatio Sepulchri* (the visit to the tomb by the three Marys, Luke 24.1—12) is enacted by four monks. Here is this liturgical drama scripted by Æthelwold is the root from which later grew the mediaeval mystery plays and the later English dramatic tradition.

As the third lesson is being read, four of the brethren shall dress, one of whom, dressed in an alb as if for some other purpose, shall enter and go secretly to the place of the sepulchre and, holding a palm in his hand, shall sit there quietly. Then, as the third respond is being sung, the other three shall enter, all of them dressed in copes and holding thuribles with incense in their hands, and step by step, in the likeness of those seeking something, they should come before the place of the sepulchre. Now truly these things are done in imitation of the angel sitting on the tomb and the women coming with perfumes so that they might anoint the body of Jesus. When, therefore, the one seated shall see these three draw near, acting just like those wandering and seeking something, he shall begin to sing in a moderate and sweet voice, *Quem quaeritis?* [Whom do you seek?] As soon as this has been sung completely, the three shall answer with one mouth: *Ihesum Nazarenum.* (Jesus of Nazareth.) Then the one seated shall say: *Non est hic. Surrexit sicut praedixerat. Ite nuntiate, quia surrexit a mortis.* [He is not here. He has risen as he foretold. Go and tell, that he is risen from the dead.] At this command the three shall turn to the choir saying: *Alleluia. Surrexit Dominus.* [Alleluia. The Lord is risen.]

The monastic life of the late Saxon church was one of the crucibles of the development of English learning and culture, and Abingdon Abbey under Æthelwold was at the forefront of this movement.

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