

AN ARCHIPELAGO IN CENTRAL SOMERSET: THE ORIGINS OF MUCHELNEY ABBEY

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Two seminal books appeared in quick succession in 2005 and 2006, both on the subject of early medieval religious communities. The scholars who wrote these books, John Blair and Sarah Foot, have interesting and thought-provoking things to say which are relevant to places in Somerset. The author of this short article has learned a lot from them especially in his interest in early monasteries and in the organisation of early medieval estates in Somerset. It is hoped that this contribution will be the start of putting some of his ideas about Somerset into print. The debt to the researches of John Blair and Sarah Foot, as well as many other scholars, will quickly become clear.

A ‘monastery’ was founded at Muchelney sometime in the late 7th or early 8th century. This is the conventional date given in the most accessible sources (Scott Holmes 1911, 55, 103; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 55, 71; Costen 1992, 101) and the founder is usually said to be King Ine of Wessex (Bates 1899, 4). At that time it would be more correct to call such an establishment a ‘minster’ rather than a monastery (Blair 2005, 80–3; Foot 2006, 5–10). Such a term at this date indicates a community of secular priests serving an area (‘parochia’) only some of whom may have been monks who might have been rather more inclined to an ascetic existence. Using this term should avoid conveying the impression that it was in any way like a late medieval monastery, or that Muchelney was in the form that it became in the Middle Ages and is still displayed on the ground today.

The foundation of a minster in Somerset at this early date begs all sorts of questions. This was the time when the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ were taking over ‘Somerset’, presumably from an earlier ‘British’

polity (or perhaps a part of Dumnonia if it stretched that far eastwards) which existed in the area (Probert 2002). Teresa Hall (2003) has discussed aspects of the relationships between the native ‘British’ church and the incoming Anglo-Saxon church with its ‘Roman’ attributes. She has suggested, for example, that there might have been some major site changes, with upland, and remote or island sites being abandoned and moved to more accessible lowland, spacious and level areas. In some cases this move was accompanied by changes in plan from irregular layouts, often in oval or circular enclosures, to those with greater formality with rectangular plans, more like ‘Roman’ sites (Hall 2000; 2003).

It has been suggested elsewhere that the monasteries of the British church might have consisted of a central *coenobium* (the communal main monastery) and satellite hermitages in the landscape around (Aston 2000, 35–41, 58; Blair 2005, 217; Dark 1994, 46; Leyser 1984, 7–17). After all the term ‘monk’ is derived from the word ‘monachus’ from the Greek ‘monos’ meaning a solitary, essentially the same as a hermit, the latter from ‘eremita’ a ‘solitary dweller in the desert’ with desert meaning unsown, untilled places.¹ These satellite hermitages would have been used by hermits for seclusion and by others for seasonal retreat (at Lent for example – Aston 2003). John Blair (2005, 217) instances no less a site than Lindisfarne in Northumbria as operating like this in the 7th century – ‘This is essentially how Lindisfarne worked: the main monastery, the Lenten retreat on St Cuthbert’s island, and the remoter hermitage on Farne’. Indeed several scholars have drawn attention to the role of islands of all types in early medieval monastic development (Aston 1993, 38; Blair 2005, 216–18;

Foot 2006, 47; Hillaby 2006, 5–7).² These could be in rivers, estuaries, marshes and fens as well as out in the sea. This aspect of early monasticism seems not to have received the attention it deserves. Often the origins of communities are either not well-documented or there is only a fanciful version concocted by later chroniclers. So the real significance of why a particular site was chosen is usually lost to us. The early topography has often not been studied; subtle changes in level and differences between floodable and dry land can be crucial in our understanding of why some early sites might have been selected. It goes without saying that usually the most basic archaeological research, such as a topographical or geophysical survey, has not been carried out at these sites.

It is noticeable how many of the important and wealthy later medieval monasteries started with groups of hermits on islands and only later acquired fully developed centralised precincts with extensive estates. Notable examples include, in fens and marshes, St Ethelreda at Ely (Cambs), Saxulf at Thorney (Cambs), probably Peterborough (Northants) as well, and St Guthlac at Crowland (Lincs). But elsewhere there are, in rivers, St Modwen on an island in the River Trent at Burton on Trent (Staffs), and Thorney Island in the River Thames the later Westminster. In Somerset the development of Glastonbury fits this model; its initial endowment is merely a collection of islands in the Somerset Levels – Meare, Godney, Westhay, Marchey or *Martinsey*, Beckery, Nyland (*Andreyesie*) and Glastonbury itself (Finberg 1964; Abrams 1996). Interestingly the earliest archaeological evidence for early medieval activity at Glastonbury comes not from the later abbey site itself but from the Tor. Following much discussion and thought, Philip Rahtz, the excavator, suggests that this is an eremitic monastery (Rahtz and Watts 2003, 77–8: ‘the monastic interpretation is now preferred’), and it is arguable that the ‘original’ or ‘British’ site may have been elsewhere (despite legends about the wooden church on the abbey site). Teresa Hall has suggested that the site called ‘Lantocai’ (probably in Street)³ could be a good candidate for this earlier British centre, later downgraded (to a hermitage or dependent church?) when the main abbey site at Glastonbury was developed. This would be rather like what seems to have happened at Sherborne (Hall 2003; 2005) and perhaps elsewhere. Michael Calder has recently reviewed what is known about the site at Street (2004, 4–11).

Only later, perhaps by around 700 AD under King Ine and presumably with the influence of Aldhelm, was the present medieval abbey site selected and developed. Frank Thorn has pointed out (pers. comm.) that the earliest date for the site move at Glastonbury could have been 678 when King Centwine appointed an abbot and granted six hides at Glastonbury (Finberg 1964, 109) and that this could have been the first Anglo-Saxon abbot. Only by the 720s and 30s were substantial grants of land gained enabling an extensive sustainable supporting estate to be developed (Finberg 1964, 110–15). Lesley Abrams detailed study (1996) of the endowment of Glastonbury Abbey from the Anglo-Saxon charters shows that after the grants of the islands it is only from around 700 AD that substantial areas of land were acquired. The confirmation grant in 725 by King Ine includes estates of ten hides or more at Brent, Sow, Pilton and Doultong. It lists the islands separately from the estates (Finberg 1964, 113).

There does not appear to be a charter for the original grant or endowment of Muchelney Abbey (Bates 1899, 5–6; Scott Holmes 1911, 103).⁴ When we first hear of its lands (not until the 11th century – Dunning 1974, 38) its endowment consists of an archipelago of fresh-water islands in the marshy area south of Langport where the rivers Parrett, Isle, Fivehead (formerly Earn) and Yeo/Ivel (Gifel) meet (Fig. 1). The waters of these four rivers have to go through a narrow gap in the hills not much more than 0.5km wide at Langport. As such the water is likely to have been ponded back at times in the past, depositing silt and making the area particularly marshy and waterlogged before moderately successful late-medieval drainage schemes had been undertaken. In this part of the valley a number of higher areas of bedrock formed the main islands of Muchelney, Thorney and Midelney, which are its named island holdings in Domesday Book in 1086. But there were also several smaller islands which were probably included in the earliest lands of Muchelney but which seem not to have been separately noted. These can be clearly seen from the contours and spot heights on the current 1:25,000 OS Explorer Map (129). They are also visible on the ground where the abandoned Dundon to Yeovil railway line between Langport and Martock has cuttings through higher ground. Further the early 19th-century tithe maps of the parishes of Drayton, Muchelney, Huish Episcopi and Kingsbury Episcopi clearly display these islands as irregular fields within the generally rectilinear fields of later drainage. A

good overview can be had from the first series OS one-inch map (sheet 18 of 1811; reprinted as sheet 84 in 1969) which shows the marshland clearly. The tithe maps have distinct field names ending in *-ey*, meaning island (Fig. 1). The islands include Horsey, north of Muchelney, Netney, north of Thorney and another larger Horsey, north of Kingsbury Episcopi. There are certainly others like the small Ham, south-east of Muchelney. The RAF vertical air photographs of the late 1940s, held in the Somerset Studies Library and in the Historic Environment Record, show areas of flooding south of Langport and this shows up several of these islands; geology maps also indicate rock 'islands' in the areas of alluvium. Also it has not proved possible, for example, to locate the place called 'Ilsey' though it is said to have been in Thorney Moor like Netney, and there may be other places which are mentioned in documents but have not been located on the ground (Dunning 1974, 88). It would also seem likely that Littleney, west of Muchelney, and formerly in Huish Episcopi parish, was originally part of the monastery's endowment.⁵ The largest 'island' which does not appear to have an *-ey* name is east of Drayton at Westover Farm. Here the field names on the Drayton tithe map do not indicate what the early name might have been.

The names of these islands are interesting (Ekwall 1960), some indicating simply their relative size and geographical position (Muchelney, Midleney and Littleney) and others their use for grazing (Horsey, twice, for horses and Netney for cattle). But one, 'Thorney', has the element 'thorn' which is seen elsewhere to be associated with the devil and evil – the obvious analogy being Christ's crown of thorns – and as such attractive to hermits wanting to engage in spiritual strife. It is associated with a number of early medieval monastic sites – Thorney near Oxford, Thorney as the early name for Westminster and Thorney Abbey in the Fens. John Blair mentions the context for this: 'Aethelwulf twice identifies thorn-bushes with haunts of wickedness, and comments that Christ's suffering took away the thorny thickets from the world' (Blair 2005, 163). Sarah Foot suggests that Aethelwulf's poem *De Abbatibus*, from which this quote is taken, may be associated with establishing the monastery at Crayke in North Yorkshire, where a hilltop was cleared of thorn bushes before erecting the buildings (Foot 2006, 188).

Other islands have no recorded names that have persisted in the landscape on early or modern maps. Thus there are two small islands south of Langport

and north of Littleney which appear to be unnamed, several in Wet Moor, east of Muchelney, and a small one south of Midleney. The south-east part of the latter is called on the 1840 Drayton tithe map 'Didney' – evidently also an 'island' name.

So, rather like Glastonbury, it looks as if the original endowment of Muchelney was a collection of islands in marshy river valleys. These would have provided ideal settlement sites for hermits and recluses, and were perhaps more suitable for the practices of the British rather than the Saxon Church. There is no indication in the records of who the hermits might have been; analogies with hermits elsewhere suggest they may have been from the upper levels of society, such as the Frankish hermit, Paternus (Wallace-Hadrill 1983, 86).

These Somerset islands were hardly extensive or productive enough to supply a large communal monastery. The development of the estate that would support such a community will be examined in a later article. It is perhaps worth asking however what the context of these islands was in relation to the local estate and administrative arrangements in the 7th and 8th centuries.

The landed endowments of early monasteries, whether extensive estates or islands in the marshes as here, could only be acquired by religious communities so long as the secular population, and especially kings and magnates, made land available to them. While indeed 'we know so little about English landholding before 700' (Blair 2005, 75) our current model (Aston 1985, 35, fig. 11), ultimately derived from Glanville Jones work in the 1960s and 1970s (Jones 1979), suggests that much of early medieval England was divided up into discrete estates. These are seen to have been smaller than later counties but larger than ancient medieval parishes, and in some ways, in many instances, were reflected in the structure of the early hundredal arrangements that begin to be evidenced in the mid-10th century.

Research has only really just begun on the early estates of Somerset (Aston 1986; Thorn 1987; Costen 1988) and it is hoped to carry out further work on this aspect in future. It is however becoming clear that there may have been between 20 and 30 discrete units in Somerset and that there is some close correlation between these estates and the later hundreds, and incidentally with the provision of minster churches.

For the Muchelney area there are a number of indications of what the earlier arrangements of land-

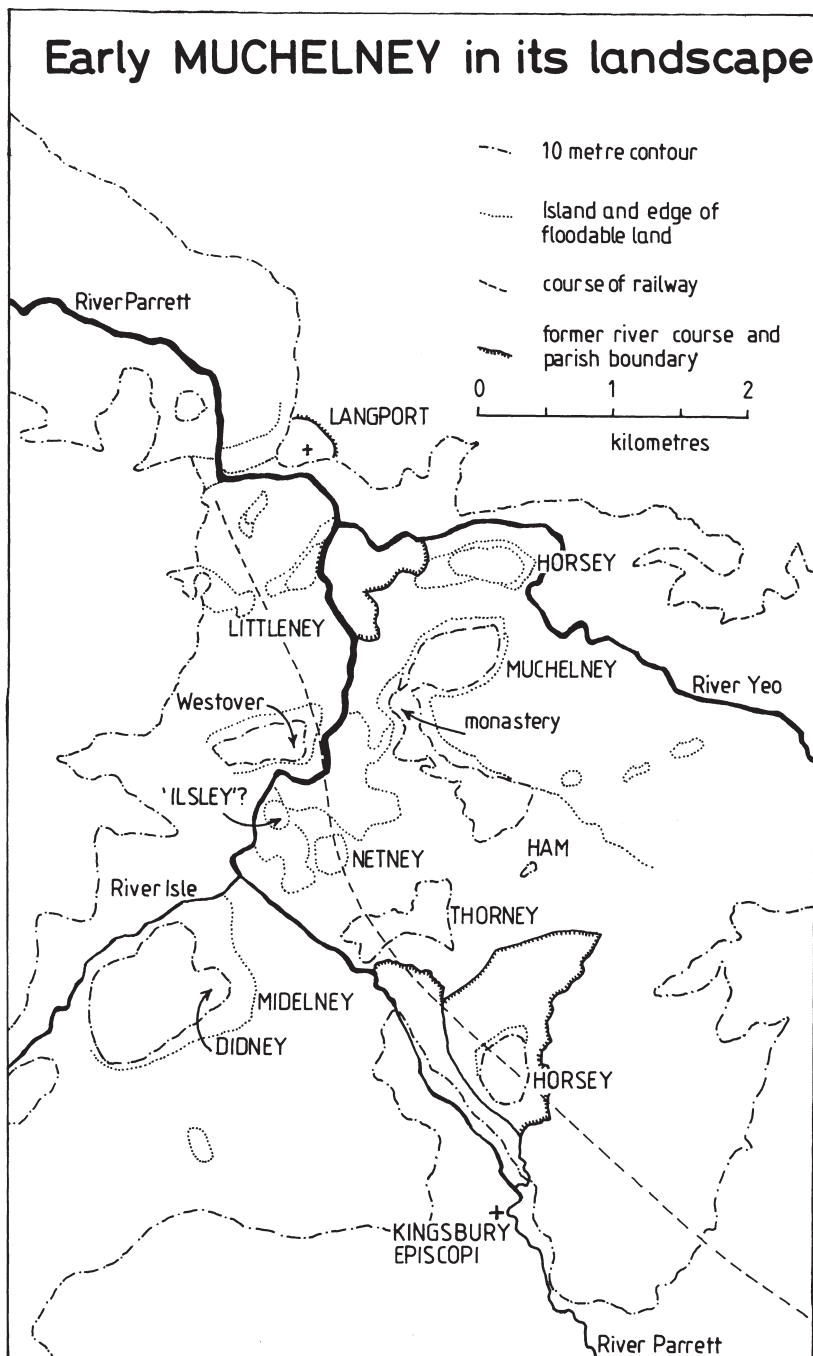


Fig. 1 Early Muchelney in its landscape: showing the area south of Langport with the rivers (modern courses and former courses marked by parish boundaries) and the 'islands' (named) in the vicinity of Muchelney

holding might have been (Fig. 2). The Geld Inquest, probably dating from 1084, is the first time we can see any administrative framework below the level of the county. There we see the early hundreds of Martock to the south-east, (South) Petherton to the south, and Abdick and Bulstone hundreds to the west.⁶ Somerton hundred to the north must have existed but is not recorded (pers comm. Frank Thorn). Figure 2 shows the rough outline of these estates and hundreds in relation to Muchelney and it becomes immediately clear that the islands are marginal both to the 'caputs' of these estates and the main 'upland' areas, which is presumably where the arable land and settlements were on these estates.

We can have some confidence in the reconstruction of the boundaries of these estates. For the main part they follow the rivers, as has been observed elsewhere (Hall 2000, 35–40). In some places the river courses have been altered though usually the old parish boundaries still follow the former courses. Thus south of Langport the boundary of Muchelney parish follows irregular former watercourses known in the Middle Ages as Horsies Pyll and Oldryver. In the south of the parish the earlier course of the river Parrett went east of the larger Horsey island and then along Oldriver Brook (Dunning 1974, 38). All of this merely reinforces what Robin Bush observed in 1978 that Muchelney parish is likely to have been originally part of the large Saxon royal estate of Martock (Bush 1978, 76, 78). The main islands of Muchelney and Thorney, together with the small island of (Muchelney) Ham, which are all known to have belonged to the monastery at Muchelney, must all have been taken out of the Martock estate (which itself may have been part of a larger Yeovil estate).⁷ The island at Midelney, which was later part of Drayton parish is more likely to have been part of the estate centred originally on South Petherton (or Kingsbury) as was the larger Horsey island, which as we have seen, was east of the original river Parrett course (Fig 1). Littlelney and the island east of Drayton with Westover Farm on it (which does not seem to have a medieval 'island' name) are not known from documents to have definitely belonged to the monastery in its early years. They probably belonged to an estate lying west of the river Parrett and centred in the Isle valley, at Ilton for example.

It is rather more difficult to clearly define the 'caputs' or head places of these estates (an attempt will be made to do this below and in future research) but of particular interest in the Muchelney area are the settlements of Langport and Kingsbury Episcopi.

Langport, the main town and centre of the area today, is a relatively recent settlement in this landscape. It was created as a burh or fortified centre, possibly by Alfred in the 9th century, and is mentioned in the Burghal Hidage document of around 909 (Hill 1969). It had defences, a mint and a market and, by the time of Domesday Book in 1086, had a number of town properties (Aston 1984, 181–3). Almost certainly it was an important port on the River Parrett (though the 'port' element of the place-name refers to the market) and a transshipment point to some of the main overland routes through the middle of Somerset. Unless there was something pre-9th century at Langport (which is possible and would be worth investigating), Muchelney had already been in existence for 200 years by the time the burh was first developed. It is not likely therefore to have had much connection with the origins of the monastery at Muchelney. In any case burhs are often appendages to the main centres of early royal estates: the burh at Axbridge was appended to Cheddar, for example and Langport probably related to the Somerton estate, as it does in Domesday Book.

For Kingsbury Episcopi the situation could be rather different. The place-name (*episcopi* – of the bishop) shows that it eventually came into the possession of the Bishops of Wells. It was certainly included in the confirmation grant of all the estates of Wells by King Edward (the Confessor) to Giso, bishop of Wells in 1065, and it may have been granted first when the see of Wells was established in 909. Thirty-eight *mansus*⁸ (or hides?) are listed in 'Cyngesbyrig' and elsewhere (Finberg 1964, 152). Kingsbury itself is an interesting name indicating both royal ownership – 'king', together with the place-name element 'bury'. This might refer to a fort, a manor or occasionally a monastery (Stenton 1943, 320–1; Smith 1956, 58–62; Draper forthcoming). John Blair has looked at the incidence of 'Kingsbury' names and minster sites (2005, 326), and apart from stating that 'the relationship of minsters to sites called 'Kingsbury' ... deserves more attention', he implies that such sites might be the fixed royal sites (at a time when the court was usually peripatetic) near to minster sites. Michael Costen points out that the only other 'Kingsbury' name in Somerset is also on a royal estate and is associated with the great Anglo-Norman minster at Milborne Port. This Kingsbury however, in the middle of Somerset, is on a peninsula at the north end of the (South) Petherton estate where it projects out into the marsh, carrying the road out to, and overlooking, the site of the minster at Muchelney (Fig. 1). It was the head

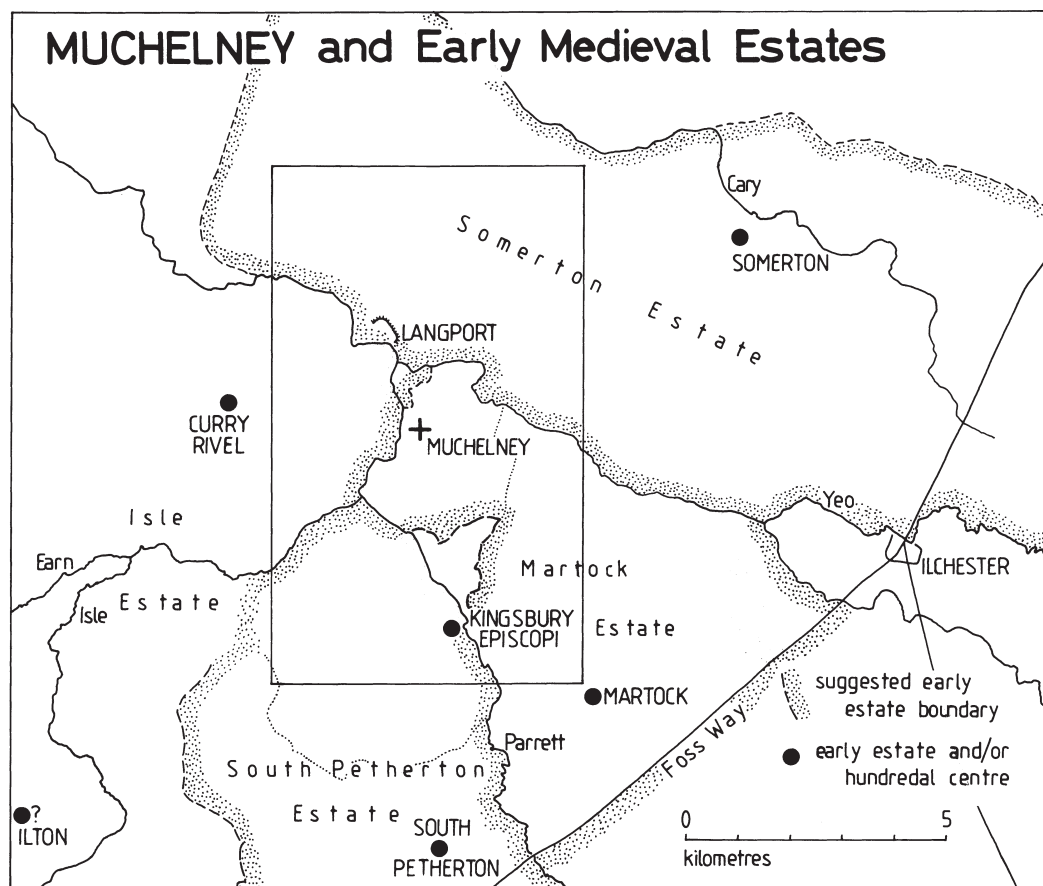


Fig. 2 Muchelney and early medieval estates: the area of Fig. 1 is shown in the centre; South Petherton and Martock are derived from the VCH (Dunning 1978); Somerton is from Aston 1986. The medieval parish boundaries of Kingsbury Episcopi (probably cut out of South Petherton) and Muchelney (probably part of Martock) are shown by dotted lines

of the medieval hundred of Kingsbury which was formed out of the properties allocated to the see of Wells when it was set up in 909. After the 16th century, the hundred, consisting as it did of scattered estates across Somerset, was divided into Kingsbury West and East hundreds. Before that Anderson says that Kingsbury Episcopi was the 'caput' of the later medieval bishop's estates, presumably as it was central to the holdings in the county (Anderson 1939, 64). Clearly Kingsbury Episcopi would repay a detailed study, particularly if it were the site of a royal residence in the 8th or 9th centuries. Had it, for example, been the royal 'caput' for the lands that became (South) Petherton and Abdick and Bulstone hundreds, and indeed beyond?⁹

Perhaps it was from a royal complex here that land was granted to found a minster at Muchelney as a royal monastery, to replace groups of hermits living out on the islands. It looks very much as if the 'islands', or at least some of them, are off the north 'coast' of two of the early estates in this part of Somerset. Some are situated off the (South) Petherton estate (particularly if it originally included Kingsbury Episcopi which, on topographical grounds, seems likely (see footnote 9), and others are off Martock. The latter are particularly interesting given Robin Bush's suggestion that Muchelney itself was originally part of the pre-Conquest royal estate of Martock (Bush 1978, 76). It might therefore be reasonable to see them as formerly parts of those

estates before they were granted to Muchelney. If this is what happened, and if this took place under King Ine with the influence and guidance of Saint Aldhelm, then little, initially, was given away – just a few small islands in a very marshy area. Indeed, rather as has been suggested for Glastonbury, the king may have been merely confirming what was already the status quo – that a group of hermits used the islands as refuges and for retreats, out in the marshes at the confluence of some of Somerset's main rivers. But if this was the case two further aspects, rather as has been suggested for Glastonbury, suggest themselves. Perhaps it was Ine and Aldhelm's intention to replace what might have been seen as a somewhat unorthodox, by the 8th century, and redundant element of the 'British' church – hermits. In doing this, the opportunity would have become available at Muchelney of developing an adequately endowed and properly laid out Saxon monastery, which would enhance the status of the Wessex kings and their bishops. To achieve this a greater endowment of land would be required.

This transition from hermitage(s) to monastery, and the change in religious philosophy it represents (from solitary to communal for example), is alluded to several times by John Blair (2005). So many monastic sites, particularly those on islands, began with groups of poverty-seeking hermits trying to escape from the world, only to develop into the great, immensely wealthy, abbeys seen in Domesday Book where their wealth can be assessed (Hill 1981, 154). This change in attitude is perhaps most succinctly put by Sarah Foot: 'One of the paradoxes of early medieval monasticism lies in the substantial temporal wealth of many religious houses. These were accumulated originally on the grounds that an essential prerequisite for the foundation of any religious house was the permanent possession of an adequate landed endowment for the collective support of the community' (Foot 2006, 87).

Along with grants of land, a properly organised monastery and precinct could be laid out in the manner that might be expected by the upper levels of society in the early medieval period. By the early 8th century the religious settlement at Muchelney was poised to make the change from a relatively unorganised group of 'British' hermits to a fully developed, carefully planned Anglo-Saxon monastery with an adequate landed endowment of mainland estates to support its resident community. It is hoped that this aspect will be discussed in a second article to follow in future.

Endnotes

- ¹ I am grateful to Frank Thorn for pointing this out to me.
- ² John Blair has suggested that I may be overstating the case for hermits in the British church as opposed to any in the Anglo-Saxon church and that there were plenty of hermits, like Guthlac, on sites in the east of the country: 'I'm sure there were very large numbers of hermits in English areas as well as in the west; but their cults had much less chance of survival than those of minster-based saints' (John Blair pers. comm.; Blair 2002). I remain convinced however that there are fundamental differences between some insular and Anglo-Saxon types of monasticism. In the latter the communal monastery is the essence whereas in the former monasticism is more ascetic and the communal monastery is just a stage in the development of the monk *en route* to becoming a full time hermit. This type of monasticism is what Marilyn Dunn terms 'transformational asceticism' (Dunn 2000, 58–9; Hall 2007).
- ³ Finberg (1964) actually prints 'Lantocal' presumably a transcription error for 'Lantocai', that is 'the church of St Kea'. The place-name is the same as Landegea in Cornwall. The location is said to be at Leigh in Street, implying that it was on higher land above the marshes.
- ⁴ Frank Thorn suggests that perhaps the island sites, if they were uncultivated and inaccessible, were simply 'squatted' on and that acquiescence and approval came later, which seems a possibility. When communities of such hermits were later recognised they would need a patron though he doubts whether they would be given a charter until a properly organised monastic successor developed. Michael Costen and Peter Ellis suggest that the hermits themselves may have come from the higher levels of society and that they were turning their backs on an affluent lifestyle which seems probable from the little historical evidence we have.
- ⁵ Frank Thorn points out the fact that the three main islands which are listed in Domesday Book were carucated not hidated and had never paid tax and that this suggests that they alone were the original holdings of the 'monastery'. Robert Dunning's comment (1974, 38) 'other "islands" including Nidney or Netney (Litney or Littleney in the later Middle Ages)' seems confused as Netney and Littleney are clearly separate islands on the tithe maps for the area. Littleney seems to have been the main holding and settlement in what later became Huish Episcopi parish; it has a deserted later medieval settlement on it (Dunning 1974, 2).

- ⁶ It will be argued in a later article that Abdick and Bulstone hundreds could have originally been one unit, and formerly a major royal estate in the Isle valley, probably based on a 'caput' at Ilton.
- ⁷ Frank Thorn suggests (pers. comm.) that Martock was part of another territory associated with the three hundreds of Yeovil (Thorn 1987, 34–5). 'Martock, I take not to be an ancient royal manor, but a grant by some king to his queen (held by Queen Edith in 1066), out of a larger royal estate'.
- ⁸ Both Michael Costen and Frank Thorn have pointed out to me that the plural of mansus should be mansi; presumably this is a mis-reading by Finberg?
- ⁹ Frank Thorn suggests (pers. comm.) 'Kingsbury as a fortified site overlooking the marshes and confluences (of the rivers), possibly strategically related to the burh at Langport, but more probably earlier than it, and essentially a northern outpost of South Petherton ancient and undated royal estate. The King-element would occur because it was part of South Petherton. South Petherton with Abdick and Bulstone hundreds (plus a number of estates originally in these hundreds but separated by 1086) were once a single unit'.

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