

## THE MINSTER AT CREWKERNE

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Until recently a document of considerable interest was sewn on the edge of folio 201 of the register of John Droxford, bishop of Bath and Wells.<sup>1</sup> The editor of the printed calendar of the register did not think its contents merited more than superficial treatment, and described it simply as 'a Paper-record of the Members pertaining to Crewkerne Church, and dues accruing therefrom. It is a terrier of the endowments of C. in the 3rd Ed. VI'.<sup>2</sup> This was a grosser error than that of an earlier reader who, finding the paper in the bishop's registry apparently some time in the late 16th century, also misread the only date on the document. Noting correctly the name of the king, Edward, he made out the words *vicesimo tercio* and inserted the document at a page in the register which also bore the same words, which he duly underlined, adding in the margin the words *concordia Crewkerne hoc tempore dat.* The date chosen happened to be one of several entries on the page for 1323. The actual date was thus misread twice, though it is clear enough on the last line of the manuscript: Saturday next after the Assumption 23 Edward; in other words 20 August 1295.

The establishment of the date, however, is no great advance in the understanding of the manuscript, for it is certain that it refers to one section only of the contents. The document itself is a copy, on paper, written in a formal hand probably at the end of the 15th or at the beginning of the 16th century.<sup>3</sup> It bears no heading but is, as was correctly surmised by the editor, a record of dues accruing to Crewkerne church. But in essence, far from being a statement of the 16th or even of the 14th century, it is a rare if not unique description of the relationship between a minster church and the chapelries and hamlets of its *parochia*, a relationship continually being modified in face of population change, land transfers and economic fluctuation, but having its origin in the days when Christian Saxons first settled in the West Country.

The recognition of minster churches has long been seen as a key to the understanding of the spread of Christianity, and following the work of Professor Deansley,<sup>4</sup> individual studies have been carried out, particularly in the West Country.<sup>5</sup> Not all minsters have been easily recognized, but they share certain characteristics, the commonest of which are the use of the word 'minster' as a description, often surviving in a place-name; the existence of a church with a substantial Domesday estate, often in or near a royal manor at the centre of a hundred; or the appearance of a group of dependent daughter churches.

Crewkerne can be identified as a minster on all these grounds. In the Domesday survey the church, granted by the Conqueror to the abbey of St. Stephen, Caen, had an estate measuring ten hides.<sup>6</sup> The abbey evidently lost possession by Henry I's time,<sup>7</sup> and for a while the benefice was a sole rectory, but by the end of the 13th century it was divided into three portions.<sup>8</sup> The division was by no means equal, and the descriptions of the two smaller ones as those of the deacon and the subdeacon,<sup>9</sup> together with the use of the word 'minster' to describe the church in the 14th century,<sup>10</sup> suggest a continuing awareness of the ancient, even collegiate, status of the benefice.

Moreover, there were three neighbouring chapels which until the 18th century recognized their dependence on Crewkerne by the outward and visible signs of the payment of symbolic dues and by bringing their dead to be buried in the single great parochial cemetery surrounding the mother church. At least until 1705 it was acknowledged that Seaborough 'doth and ought customarily to send yearly . . . upon the first Sunday after the day of the feast of St. Michael, the key of the chapple, with a groat, and lay it on the cancell-board in the church of Crewkerne';<sup>11</sup> and burial of Seaborough people continued until 1734 if not later.<sup>12</sup> Wayford, in similar fashion, acquired the right to bury its dead in its own churchyard only in 1718, and until 1750

sent its clerk to Crewkerne with the church door key on 'dedication Sunday', the first Sunday after Michaelmas, to lay it on the altar there and offer four pence.<sup>13</sup> Misterton by its very name in an earlier form, Minsterton, reveals its dependent status,<sup>14</sup> and its chapel was the last of the three to receive licence for a burial ground. A faculty was granted in 1791 on two counts: that the village was so far from the mother church of Crewkerne; and that its particular portion of the burial ground there had become so overcrowded that corpses had to be disturbed every four or five years to make room for more.<sup>15</sup> 'Tribute money' of four pence a year continued to be paid until 1829, together with the traditional offering of the church door key.<sup>16</sup>

One other place of worship also lay within the *parochia* of Crewkerne, though it achieved independence very much earlier. The manor of Eastham was a small estate which, though part of the royal estate of Crewkerne in the Confessor's time, had like Seaborough been granted away by 1086.<sup>17</sup> A church had been established there by 1223<sup>18</sup> and very likely much earlier, but the estate remained small and it is curious that its church should have achieved independence when Wayford and Seaborough, much larger independent estates, did not. The terms under which this independence was granted are recorded in an agreement which forms the last, and the only dated, portion of the document under discussion.

This agreement or *concordia* was made at Eastham on 20 August 1295 between the two lords of Eastham, Thomas Asselond and William Crikett, and the portioners of the divided rectory of Crewkerne on the one hand, and Geoffrey, rector of the chapel (*rectoris capelle*) on the other. It stated simply that in return for rights of burial at Eastham, the portioners should receive half the tithes of some 106 acres of land in various named arable fields and meadows. Thereafter Eastham was ecclesiastically independent; its rector, appointed by successive owners of the manor, was able to exercise the three sacraments of baptism, marriage and burial without reference to the mother church at Crewkerne. This was, as it turned out, an empty victory: Eastham became depopulated during the later Middle Ages and by the mid-16th century the church was in ruins.<sup>19</sup> Rectors were still appointed in succession because their tithes and glebe were not thereby affected, and though the incumbents of Crewkerne usually held the benefice in the 19th century,<sup>20</sup> the rectory was not finally merged with its neighbour until 1925, a return to an arrangement which had been obtained perhaps a thousand years earlier.

The agreement over burial rights at Eastham is significantly the last entry in the document about Crewkerne dues and the only one to describe an event rather than a state of affairs. Because the manuscript is a copy there is no means of knowing certainly whether it is an addition, but there is a good deal of evidence to place much if not all the remainder in an earlier, and probably much earlier, period. Internal evidence provides no precise dating clues. The chapels of Misterton, Wayford and Seaborough are mentioned,<sup>21</sup> but we have no exact independent statements for their foundation. Seaborough contains a mid-13th-century effigy, and the fabric of Wayford is of a similar period, but rebuilding has destroyed any early features of Misterton. Written sources indicate churches at Wayford by 1266<sup>21</sup> and at Misterton not until the early 14th century.<sup>22</sup>

Other pieces of internal evidence are no more helpful. A number of tenants are named under Seaborough, but they are unlikely to be traced. There is a reference under Misterton to the cottars of 'Sporisplace', but that estate is traceable only from a much later period.<sup>23</sup> Henley manor, also mentioned in the document, is first so named in 1222.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the best indication of all appears in the first few lines, relating to the heart of the *parochia*, Crewkerne itself. There among the 'members' belonging to the church were the estates of Craft St. Reyne and Craft Comitisse. The first refers to an area in the north-west of the parish near the chapel of St. Reyne;<sup>25</sup> the second is an estate which must have been so-called after its owner Isabel de Fortibus, Countess

of Aumale, who seems to have acquired the property her great-grandfather William de Reviere (died 1217) granted to his daughter Joan on her marriage with William de Briwere (died 1232-3).<sup>26</sup> Isabel was certainly in possession by 1267<sup>27</sup> and died in 1293.<sup>28</sup>

It is unlikely that the date of compilation of this document can be more precisely defined than soon after the middle of the 13th century, though the occasion for it may perhaps have been the conversion of the benefice of Crewkerne from a sole rectory into one of three portions. That event seems to have taken place between 1272 and 1282.<sup>29</sup>

The date of compilation is, however, of significance only because it has been the occasion for the survival of an important statement of fact. That statement, without heading of any kind, is divided into paragraphs detailing the various dues payable by the several 'members' of the ancient *parochia* of Crewkerne to the mother church. The first paragraph, where the document is slightly damaged and not quite complete, appears under the marginal title of *Crukernia* and includes the central hamlets of the parish, Hewish, Combe, Tuncombe, Craft St. Reyne, Craft Comitisse and an illegible name, presumably Woolminstone. These were hamlets of the main manor of Crewkerne, and all tithes and offerings from them belonged to the mother church, both by law and custom.

At Misterton, a village south of the town and linked with but not an integral part of the main manor, there was a more complicated situation. All tenants paid great tithes to the parish church but the small tithes, that is those of wax and honey, apples and other fruit, leeks, grass and other things, together with the personal tithes of the cottars, tithes of the wages of the servants of the tenants, and tithes of sheaves from their own rector's glebe (*de gleba rector' curati de Mosterton (sic)*) went to the rector of Misterton. But there were some exceptions. If the servants' wages were converted by buying or selling tithable goods, then profits were also tithable and should be paid to Crewkerne. An exception was also made for the tenants and cottars of the farm called 'Sporisplace', who paid half the tithe of lambs and wool to Crewkerne and half to the rector of Misterton. All parishioners, without exception, had to go to Crewkerne on its dedication festival at the time of High Mass, there to receive absolution and to make an offering to the celebrant; and all, without exception, were taken to Crewkerne for burial; and the living meanwhile maintained part of the wall of the churchyard next to their plot, namely that on the south side of the church leading towards 'Scolestrete'.<sup>30</sup>

The hamlets now forming the parish of Wayford were separately distinguished. All but the cottars of Wayford and Oathill paid all tithes and offerings wholly to Crewkerne; they took their children to be baptised and their daughters to be wed at their own village church, but could be buried only at Crewkerne. All parishioners, tenants and cottars alike, with their households, had like the people of Misterton to go to Crewkerne for the dedication festival. Ashcombe and Beer, now represented by Ashcombe and Lower Bere Chapel farms, were linked together. The farmers or occupiers (*degens*) of both owed all tithes to Crewkerne, but the farmers of Ashcombe took their turn in providing the holy loaf for Wayford church, and in return held an acre of land at Ashcombe of the lord of Wayford. But the farmer and his household still looked to Crewkerne for all sacraments.

The lord of the manor of Henley or his tenant, with wife and two principal servants, paid their tithes to Crewkerne and looked there for spiritual care. Cottars and others living in the hamlet, however, went to Misterton for baptisms and weddings, and like the Misterton folk, paid oblations there and joined in the throng going to Crewkerne on dedication day.

This wide variety of practice within one single ancient parish must have emerged gradually over a great number of years and certainly survived for many

more. Details of tithe payments have not survived for any period thereafter until the 19th century, when Earl Poulett and the tenant farmers on what had once been part of Craft St. Reyne, Craft Comitisse and Tuncombe were arguing that tithes were not payable and had not been since the Dissolution.<sup>31</sup> Their arguments were not upheld and John Hussey, lay rector and successor to the portioners of Crewkerne rectory, won his case. But nevertheless there had been changes there over the years, for tithes in kind had long since been replaced by a *modus*, an agreed equivalent in cash.

Despite the decision in Mr. Hussey's favour, the tithe commissioners remained in doubt about the question, and parts of Crewkerne parish including the southern section of Hinton Park were somehow not shown on the tithe map as belonging to the parish. Elsewhere they were sure enough in the face of some variety. At Misterton the vicar's small tithes had been changed to cash payments, no longer paid in wax and honey, leeks or apples; but all were to pay one penny for their gardens, one penny for every cockerel, and other sums for calves, colts and hay. There had been rather less change at Wayford, and although some small areas had paid tithes to Ford abbey since the end of the 13th century and been tithe-free since the Dissolution, most of Oathill, scattered properties in Wayford and the whole of Bere Chapel farm still paid dues to Crewkerne.<sup>32</sup> The medieval pattern could still be clearly seen in the 19th century.

Continuity is a strong and significant feature of ecclesiastical history and relatively modern practices can reflect very ancient custom. These variations in the payment of tithes in and near Crewkerne were based on factors of some antiquity. Place-names, Crewkerne's position at the centre of a royal manor and hundred, and a wealthy church in the 11th century, are facts which would of themselves suggest that its church was a minster predating the Norman Conquest. The 13th-century statement of the various rights and duties of the inhabitants of the ancient parish here described provides a clearer statement of the workings of a minster parish than is usually met with; and in its very variety may suggest that, even if clothed in names and places of the 13th century, it may reflect a stage in continuing development from the first establishment of the church in Crewkerne.

The heart of the *parochia* was clearly the mother church at Crewkerne. The royal manor was first recorded in the will of King Alfred. The interpretation of the place-name Crewkerne as a church or hermitage is no longer accepted, and its inclusion in Alfred's will as an estate alongside other places specifically described as *monasteria* would seem to imply that Crewkerne itself was not principally such an institution. Yet in the time of Ethelred II and Cnut the town was a minting place, and it is surely inconceivable that a significant economic unit would not also have possessed a church.<sup>33</sup>

Other royal estates in the county, often forming (like those in Devon) the centres of hundreds, certainly possessed minster churches. The minster at Cheddar was mentioned in Alfred's will; the one at Taunton occurs in 904 just as it passed out of royal hands;<sup>34</sup> Bedminster by its name implies the existence of one on another large Crown property; South Petherton's rich church certainly had dependent daughters, and Frome and Ilchester had rich churches, the first a foundation of St. Aldhelm in the late 7th century.<sup>35</sup> Chewton Mendip later had four daughters all lying within the estate left by Alfred to his son Edward.

There is thus substantial evidence to indicate that in widely scattered parts of Somerset the strong correlation between important churches and royal estates indicates the Crown's place in conversion. The dating of this movement must necessarily be somewhat imprecise, but the role of a powerful Christian king such as Ine (died 725) and the work of men like St. Aldhelm (died 709) must have been crucial in the spread of the Gospel, especially in the 8th century. There is nothing to prove precisely the beginnings at Crewkerne, but the importance of the place to later Saxons

and their successors was due to its topographical position on natural trade routes, some of prehistoric significance and obviously of use to early Saxon settlers. The second stage of conversion was to take the faith from the chosen centre into the countryside, a movement which continued, in so far as churches were built, perhaps into the 14th century.<sup>36</sup> This stage produced independent churches and parishes at an early date in many places, but Crewkerne remained a single estate until the Conquest, establishing a strong, centralized church which no amount of division of the secular estate in the 11th century could diminish. It remained undiminished in many ways into the 19th century, and the ancient pattern has in some of these ways and for other reasons been re-created in the middle of the 20th century.<sup>37</sup>

1. The document was removed from its original position in the register but is still to be found loose within the front cover: Somerset Record Office D/D/B reg 1.
2. *Calendar of the Register of John de Drokenesford*, ed. Bishop [Edmund] Hobhouse (Somerset Record Society i (1887)), p. 219.
3. I am grateful to Mr. Derek Shorrocks for confirming this.
4. M. Deansley, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England*, 191-210.
5. C. A. Raleigh Radford in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 106, 36-45, and in *Devon Historian* 11 (October 1975), 2-11; C. C. Taylor, *Dorset*, 78-83; B. R. Kemp, 'The Mother Church of Thatcham', *Berks. Arch. Jnl.*, 63, 15-22; R. W. Dunning, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 119, 44-50.
6. *Victoria History of Somerset* i, 470.
7. W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vi, 1071-2.
8. *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1292-1301, 53; *Victoria History of Somerset* ii, 21.
9. British Library, Additional MS 49359, f. 74.
10. Devon Record Office, Courtenay Cartulary (TD 51), at end.
11. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 112, 87.
12. Somerset Record Office, D/P/crew 2/1/3.
13. Somerset Record Office, D/P/wa 2/1/1, 4/1/1; revived 1818-24 when a shilling was paid at Easter.
14. *Kirby's Quest for Somerset*, ed. E. Green (Somerset Record Society iii), 157.
15. Wells, Diocesan Registry, faculty register.
16. Somerset Record Office, D/P/mis 4/1/1-2.
17. *Victoria History of Somerset* i, 477.
18. *Curia Regis Rolls* xi, 275; *Year Book 5 Edward II* (Selden Society xi), 212.
19. Public Record Office, E 310/23/127 no. 90.
20. Somerset Record Office, D/D/Bo.
21. *Registers of Walter Giffard and Henry Bowett*, ed. T. S. Holmes (Somerset Record Society xiii), 10.
22. British Library Additional MS 49359, f. 74.
23. Devon Record Office, Courtenay Cartulary, pp. 180-1. This and the other references to Misterton and Wayford I owe to my colleague Mr. R. J. E. Bush.
24. *Feet of Fines, Richard I to Edward I*, ed. E. Green (Somerset Record Society vi), 44; *Curia Regis Rolls* x, 116.
25. Hook Manor, Donhead St. Andrew, Arundell MSS G 588. The general site is now known as St. Rayn's Hill.
26. *Close Rolls* 1231-4, 198; *Somerset Pleas II*, ed. L. Landon (Somerset Record Society xxxvi), 166-/, 173-4, 181-2.
27. Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Top Gen d 20.
28. *Calendar of Patent Rolls* 1292-1301, 53.
29. *Somerset Pleas II*, 166-7, 173-4; *Calendar of Patent Rolls* 1292-1301, 53.
30. This is the earliest reference to a school in Crewkerne.
31. Somerset Record Office, DD/PT, boxes 22a, 37.
32. Ford Abbey, Cartulary, pp. 270, 277, 524-30, 539, 541; Somerset Record Office, tithe maps and awards of Misterton and Wayford.
33. Alfred's will (dated between 873 and 888) is translated in *English Historical Documents I*, ed. D. Whitelock, 492-5.
34. *Early Charters of Wessex*, ed. H. P. R. Finberg, 128, 221-3.
35. *Victoria History of Somerset* i, 436; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 106, 41.
36. *Victoria History of Somerset* iii, 253.
37. *Bath and Wells Diocesan Directory*.