

Thomas Chard, Abbot of Ford

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THOMAS CHARD, the last Abbot of Ford, and a notable builder, has been the subject of three papers contributed to the *Proceedings* of this Society. In the volume for 1891 the Rev. F. W. Weaver gave cogent reasons for believing that his patronymic was Tybbes, and that, like many other monks of his time, he took an alternative surname from his birthplace. Following several previous writers, Mr. Weaver further identified him with Thomas Chard, Prior successively of Montacute and Karswell, and titular Bishop of Solymbria in Thrace, but, in order to do this, he was constrained to suggest that the date of the probate of this prelate's will, as given officially, was erroneous.

Five years later, in the light of fresh evidence, Mr. Weaver contributed a second paper, in which he carefully distinguished between the Abbot and the Bishop.

The 'Correction' is, however, entirely ignored in a paper by the Rev. Preb. D. J. Pring, printed in the volume for 1927, and largely based upon the opinions of Dr. George Oliver, who died in 1861, before the discovery of several documents mentioned by Mr. Weaver. It therefore seems desirable, without undue iteration, to recall a few salient facts.

1. The Bishop of Solymbria was a Cluniac, wearing a black habit; the Abbot of Ford was a Cistercian, wearing a white habit.

2. There are in the Public Record Office a holograph letter from the Bishop, and three original documents subscribed by the Abbot. It will be seen by the reproductions now given,

not only that the character of their respective hands was

A.D.
1517

Thomas Abbot of Ford

18 May
1533

Thomas Solubrye
Bishop of Solubrye

11 Oct.
1535

Thomas Abbot
of Ford

8 Mar.
1539

Thomas
Bishop of Solubrye

Signatures of Thomas, Abbot of Ford, and Thomas, Bishop of Solymbria.

totally unlike, but also that they describe themselves differently.

3. The will of 'Thomas, Bushop of Solubrye', executed on

the 1st of October 1541, was proved at Wells, a fortnight later, (*xvj die mensis Octobris*) 1541.

On the other hand, an account of Thomas Arundel, the King's Receiver of the revenues of suppressed monasteries in Devon and Cornwall, from Michaelmas 1543 to Michaelmas 1544, under the heading of Ford, records the payment of 40*l.* to the late Abbot (*in pensione Thome Chard nuper Abbatis ibidem*), as part of his pension of 80*l.*, with an explanation that this was only for the first half of the financial year, because the recipient had died about Lady Day (*eo quod mortuus est circa festum Annunciationis beate Marie Virginis ultimo preteritum*).¹

Oliver was mistaken, not only in identifying Thomas Chard *alias* Tybbes with Thomas Chard, Prior of Montacute and Bishop of Solymbria, but also in saying that the former did not become Abbot of Ford until 1521. Under date of 18th January 1505-6, the Register of the University of Oxford has an entry:—

‘Admissus est ad lecturam libri Sententiarum venerabilis pater dominus Thomas Charde, abbas monasterii de Foorde, monachus ordinis Cisterciensis.’

One of his signatures as Abbot reproduced here belongs to the year 1517.

As Mr. Pring seems to attach importance to the occurrence of a mitre in connexion with the initials and the name of Thomas Chard, on carved panels in the part of Ford Abbey built by him, it is necessary to observe that the use of this ornament was by no means confined to bishops.² The Pope could freely allow it to ecclesiastics of lower rank. Thus, the canons of several cathedral churches on the continent wear mitres on solemn occasions.

In 1718-19, Browne Willis published a History of the Mitred Abbeys in England whose heads sat in Parliament. All these were Benedictines, but the Papal Registers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries show that various members of other religious orders were allowed to wear full pontifical *insignia*. So

¹ Ministers' Accounts, no. 7302, f. 10*d.*

² Two of the panels in question are figured in Mr. W. H. Hamilton Rogers's *Ancient Sepulchral Effigies*, pp. 161, 163. The author, however, supposed the mitre to denote episcopal rank.

numerous indeed were the indults issued for this purpose that, in 1439, Archbishop Chichele entered a protest, complaining that abbots and priors were liable to be mistaken for bishops.¹ Nevertheless the system continued.

Although the date at which the Abbot of Ford was raised to an equality with the heads of several other Cistercian houses in England, there is no reason to doubt that the mitres sculptured at Ford are abbatial rather than episcopal.

¹ The mitred effigies of John Newland, Augustinian Abbot of Bristol (1481), and William Parker, Benedictine Abbot of Gloucester (1535), are figured in Crossley's *English Church Monuments*.