

The patronage of St Nicholas at Littlemore Priory

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According to an undated charter in the Bodleian Library, the Benedictine priory of Sandford or Littlemore, probably founded late in the reign of Stephen (1135-54),¹ was later described as dedicated in honour of Ss Mary, Edmund and Nicholas.² Dedication of twelfth-century religious houses in honour of Mary was so frequent as to be next-to-customary.³ It was the saints who accompanied her who set the devotional tone, as it were, and were chosen for what they represented to the community.⁴ It seems highly unlikely that the Edmund commemorated here was the martyred ninth-century king of East Anglia, rather than the local saint Edmund of Abingdon, born there *circa* 1175, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1233, and canonised in 1246 shortly after his death. However much it may have been hoped at the time of the Bodleian charter that Edmund's popularity would aid the priory – the dedication suggests the nuns had come by a relic of the archbishop – Edmund is never mentioned again in later surviving documents. Indeed, in 1177⁵ and again in the Hundred Rolls of 1279/80, patronage of the religious house comes from St Nicholas alone.⁶ He was also titular of the conventual (or perhaps estate) church whose probable site is marked by coffins excavated in 1661 and finds of bones since.⁷

The priory's founder was Robert of Sandford, demesne lord of that portion of Sandford which was held from Abingdon Abbey in return for knight service.⁸ At Domesday, 10 hides at Sandford were held from Abingdon Abbey by Wenric (*alias* Gueres of Palences⁹), whose predecessor in 1066, a wealthy priest called Blackman, using the profits of Sandford, built St Andrew's church

¹ William Page (ed.), *A History of the County of Oxford*, hereafter 'VCH Oxon' [Victoria County History], 2 (1907), p. 75.

² VCH Oxon, 2, p. 75, citing Oxford, Bodleian Library, Charter Oxon. 4.

³ Alison Binns, *Dedications of Monastic Houses in England and Wales, 1066–1216*, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion 1 (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1989).

⁴ For the motives behind dedication choices, see Graham Jones, *Saints in the Landscape* (Stroud, Tempus, 2007), hereafter Jones, 'Saints'.

⁵ VCH Oxon 2, p. 75, cites Thomas Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum, or, the History of the Ancient Abbies, and other Monasteries [etc]* (no pub. details), 4. 490, and 492 fn. 6. However, the epitomised edition of the *Monasticon* (London, Samuel Keble, 1693), hereafter Dugdale, 'Monasticon', states that 'Roger de Theoni, Roger de Tanford, and Thomas Bussel, whose deed bears date 1254 (8 Henry III) gave lands to the church of St Nicholas and priory of nuns there': Vol. 3, p. 267, addition to Vol. 1, p. 55, no. 482.

⁶ *Rotuli Hundredorum* (2 vols, London, Record Commission, 1812–18), 2, 723.

⁷ Mary D. Lobel (ed.), 'Sandford on Thames', VCH Oxon, 5, *Bullington Hundred* (1957), pp.267x75. Cf. Dugdale, 'Monasticon', 1, p. 55: Grant of a rent 'to God, and the Church of St Nicholas of Sandford, and to the Nuns there'.

⁸ VCH Oxon, 2, p. 75.

⁹ 'Identified with some confidence' in, and heading, the list of military tenants of the abbey (VCH Oxon, 5, pp. 267x75) in the Abingdon Chronicle. See Philip Morgan (ed.), *Domesday Book, 5, Berkshire* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1979), Note 7, where Wenric/Gueres is given as 'Warriss of Palences', though it is noted that the MS. has 'Gueres de Palences'. A further note refers to Reaney, *Dictionary of British Surnames*, under 'Werry'. L. F. Salzman (ed.), VCH Oxon, 1, asserted (p. 381) that 'It is not unlikely that some, at least, of the numerous examples of the Old French personal name Guerri go back to an original Wenric, and that Gueres represents an intermediate form.' Surname dictionaries indeed suggest that this is a further variant of the name which appears *inter alia* as Gery, Warre, Werre, Gerry, Werry, Warry, and Warriss. That said, no French place-name similar to Palences has been found by the writer. There is a commune Palante in Haute-Saône, but the writer wonders if this could be an Hispanic name? Palentia in Castile and Leon is the Peninsula's earliest university city.

on Andersey island in the loop of the Thames opposite Abingdon.¹⁰ Four hides were held by Wenric/Gueres as a separate holding (no predecessor being named), while a single hide was jointed tenanted by Robert and Roger (preceded by Siward)¹¹ and thought to be the hide at Sandford found later belonging to St George's church in Oxford Castle.¹² Holdings of Wenric/Gueres elsewhere had passed by 1240 to an heiress of Thomas of Sandford.

The priory was founded on a piece of ground in Sandford parish called Cherley¹³ and endowed with six virgates of arable and four acres of pasture known as Chaldewelle'.¹⁴ This refers to the spring known as 'Chawdwell' in 1512,¹⁵ reached by a path called 'Chowleswell lane' in 1605,¹⁶ later 'Chose-well', and by 1850 'Chosel' or 'Chosler'.¹⁷ In modern times the path to the spring has been known as Spring Lane. Furlongs in Lake Field, one of the open fields east of Littlemore village and lying by the stream flowing south into Northfield Brook, were named after Chosewell Lane, while another path led from the village past this spring across Northfield Brook to the site of the priory, just within Sandford parish.¹⁸ There was a William de Chalderwelle in Littlemore in 1316 and 1327.¹⁹ This looks like a normal progression in local pronunciation from an original *ceald wella*, 'cold well'. In West Saxon Old English *ceald* – with an initial 'ch' – was the counterpart of Anglian *cald*, the ancestor of the modern word 'cold'.

Robert's undated charter refers to 'the land of Cherley' and 'the church of Cherley' as if there was a settlement there, and though the latter phrase may have been meant to refer to the church of the priory, it remains a possibility that Cherley was the site of a church or field chapel before the arrival of the nuns. The church at Sandford ('*ecclesia sive capella*' in 1537, so of uncertain status²⁰) was understood in 1279 to have been founded by Guerres/Wenric, that is, two centuries earlier.²¹ While this may well have been the case, it seems strange that the monks of Abingdon had not provided a place of worship for their vill at Sandford, the major part of which had been given to them by king Coenwulf of Mercia in 811.²²

Cold wells have been considered curative,²³ and some Chadwells have been taken to be 'holy' wells of St Chad.²⁴ A nearby water supply considered curative could well attract a small religious

¹⁰ VCH Berks, 4, p. 425.

¹¹ John Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book, 14, Oxfordshire* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1978), hereafter DB Oxon, 9,3-5.

¹² VCH Oxon, 5, pp. 267x75.

¹³ VCH Oxon, 2, p. 75, citing Hundred Rolls (Record Commission), 2, 723.

¹⁴ VCH Oxon, 5, pp. 267x75, also citing Hundred Rolls (Record Commission), 2, 723, notes that the pasture, of four acres, 'is here' (presumably referring to the Hundred Rolls entry) called 'Chaldewelle' and that the endowment included seven, not six virgates of arable.

¹⁵ VCH Oxon 5, pp. 206x14, citing Oxford, Bodleian MS. Christ Church College, c 320, ff. 2, 4-5.

¹⁶ Probably marked as such on Thomas Langdon's map of 1605, Oxford, Christ Church College Muniments, hereafter 'Langdon's Map'.

¹⁷ VCH Oxon, 5, pp. 267x75, citing Oxford, MS. Top. Oxon, c78, f. 198.

¹⁸ VCH Oxon 5, pp. 206x14.

¹⁹ VCH Oxon 5, pp. 206x14, citing TNA, E 179/161/8, 9.

²⁰ VCH Oxon 5, pp. 206x14, citing

²¹ Hundred Rolls (Record Commission), 2, 723.

²² Charter Sawyer 166, unless this refers to Dry Sandford in Berkshire. *Charters of the Abingdon Abbey, Part 1 and Part 2*, ed. S. E. Kelly, British Academy, Anglo-Saxon Charters 7-8 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000-1).

²³ e.g. John Warburton, writing about Paulinus Well in Northumberland, in his history of the county *circa* 1715: 'water very cold, and clear as christall, and if cleaned out would be a most comodious cold bath and perhaps effect

foundation or a chapel, perhaps with a hermit. Religious houses founded in the twelfth-century at sites of ritual or reputed efficacy are too many to reject this out of hand as a possibility at Minchery Farm. Indeed, the name Cherley may itself be significant. If it referred to land associated with a group of free tenants of the class known as ceorls, a spelling like ‘Charley’ might be expected. It can hardly derive from Old English *ceorra*, ‘winding’, the term which gave rise to the river name Cherwell, or *cerring*, ‘a river bend’.²⁵ An Old English personal name Ceorra would more than likely have left signs of a genitive form such as ‘Chernley’. There remains a chance that the voicing of a genitive case has been lost – in which case a further possibility is opened up that Cherley derives from *cirice-lēah*, ‘church in a clearing or open wooded ground’. In southern England there are several places called Cheriton with this meaning, and two Cheringtons in the western Midlands.²⁶

The chief meadows on the Littlemore side of Northfield Brook and along the Thames towards Iffley were Nye Mead, Balden, Wig Mead, and Mareshease, the last two held by lot in the eighteenth century.²⁷ In the absence of early spellings it is difficult to make conclusions about the etymology of Wig Mead, provisionally sited on the opposite bank of the Northfield Brook from the priory by the author of the map which accompanies the VCH article on Iffley. Nevertheless, it is just possible that behind the name lies Old English *wēoh* (pronounced ‘wee-ock’), meaning a temple or shrine,²⁸ often one on or close to a routeway.²⁹

An obvious reason for choosing Nicholas is that he was titular of the monks’ church at Abingdon, first mentioned in the late twelfth century.³⁰ Its west end overlooks the market place, a frequent location for Nicholas churches³¹ and one which resonates with his legend.³² Usually interpreted as the sailors’ saint, Nicholas is best seen as a role model for generous and merciful merchants.³³

several cures without a marvell’ (cited by Jeremy Harte, *English Holy Wells, A Sourcebook* (3 vols, Heart of Albion Press, 2008), hereafter Harte, ‘Wells’, 2, p. 286.

²⁴ Harte, ‘Wells’, 2, e.g. p. 180.

²⁵ Eilert Ekwall, *English River Names* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968).

²⁶ A[ntony] D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place-Names* (rev. edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011); Eilert Ekwall, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (4th edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964).

²⁷ VCH Oxon 5, pp. 206x14, citing Langdon’s Map.

²⁸ Margaret Gelling, ‘Place-names and Anglo-Saxon paganism’, *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 8 (1961), pp. 7-25; ‘Further thoughts on pagan place-names’, in *Otium et Negotium: Studies in onomatology and library science presented in Olof von Feilitzen* (Stockholm, 1973), pp. 154-61; *Signposts to the Past: Place-Names and the History of England* (2nd edn, Chichester, Phillimore, 1988), pp. 100-01, 257; ‘Paganism and Christianity in Wirral?’, *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 25 (1992-3), p. 11. David Wilson, ‘A note on OE *hearg* and *weoh* as place-name elements representing different types of pagan worship sites’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 4 (1985), pp. 179-83, hereafter Wilson, ‘Elements’. John Blair, ‘Anglo-Saxon pagan shrines and their prototypes’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 8 (1995), pp. 1-28. Audrey Meaney, ‘Pagan English sanctuaries, place-names and hundred meeting places, in John Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1995), pp. 375-401.

²⁹ Wilson, ‘Elements’.

³⁰ VCH Berks, 4, pp. 430x51.

³¹ Graham Jones ‘Saints’, pp. 217-22; ‘St Nicholas, icon of mercantile virtues: Transition and continuity of a European myth’, in Richard Littlejohns and Sara Soncini (eds), *Myths of Europe* (Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2007), pp. 73-88, hereafter Jones, ‘Nicholas’, esp. pp. 79-81.

³² Jones, ‘Nicholas’, esp. pp. 79-81.

³³ Jones, ‘Nicholas’, pp. 82-88.

Cures attributed to Nicholas were often credited to the ‘miraculous’ oil said to flow from his shrine. His episcopal city was Myra on the southern coast of modern Turkey – the eponymous production centre of myrrh. A *Life* of Nicholas with an account of his miracles was written in Naples in the third quarter of the ninth century, sparking interest in the saint in western Europe.³⁴ For the Normans in England, it was known that in 1066 William the Conqueror had cried out to Nicholas for help when his invasion fleet was caught by a Channel storm.³⁵ However, existing interest in Nicholas was dwarfed by the great surge of popularity after his remains were stolen from Myra in 1087 and taken to Bari on Italy’s Adriatic coast. Bari had recently fallen to Robert Guiscard, an adventurer from William’s duchy of Normandy. This was within about 60 years of the foundation of Littlemore Priory, by which time Nicholas was fast becoming one of the pre-eminent patronal saints of English churches and hospitals, doubtless benefitting from the Norman connection.

Another attractive explanation for the dedication of the priory and its church in honour of Nicholas may lie in the legend of the Three Balls, the bags of gold thrown in by Bishop Nicholas through the window of the merchant whose three daughters were without dowry as a result of his commercial misfortunes. Nunneries were not only the preserve of pious women who dedicated their lives to God. They were also refuges for women who, for whatever reason, needed a haven. When Robert of Sandford founded Littlemore Priory, his daughter Christine became a nun there.³⁶ This may have been her personal profession: a renunciation of home and family. On the other hand, it is not impossible that Christine was disabled, or for some other reason unlikely to find a husband in the usual ways of the time. Small religious houses were founded by gentry families for various reasons. Littlemore may have been Christine’s dowry, brought with her to her family’s new priory as she was married to Christ in place of an earthly spouse.

³⁴ Jones, ‘Nicholas’, p. 75, fn. 11.

³⁵ *Orderic Vitalis, Ecclesiastical History*, ed. by Majorie Chibnall (6 vols, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969-80), 2, pp. 208-09.

³⁶ Sandford Cartulary, 1, 16, fn. 6.