

The Spiritual Life in Milton

In the time of the Minster

A little to the east of the current abbey church, up in the woods behind it, there is a flat area of ground on which stands the Chapel of St Catherine. It was possibly here that a Christian community was founded, or re-founded by King Athelstan. The area was known variously as Milton or Middleton and the foundation later became the Benedictine monastery we see today. It has been suggested that Athelstan donated the lands and rights listed in his charter, and repeated in the Domesday Book, to atone for the death of his half-brother Edwin who had died in mysterious circumstances at sea in 933 after a dispute about inheritance. Confession and penance were very important in the church at the time. This would be a very public act of penance.

It is said that his father, Edward the Elder, had been sent to the Lord of Athelhampton as a child to keep him safe from marauding Vikings. As a grown man, he returned to visit his old nurse and met and married a shepherdess called Egwynn who came from Milton. Their first born was named after Athelhampton and called Athelstan. The boy would grow up familiar with the two neighbouring settlements.

Whether from guilt or sentiment, the endowment was made, giving lands to the glory of God, St Mary, St Michael, St Sampson and St Branwalader in 934. We do not have the original charter but the names of the witnesses recorded on a later copy indicate that it was signed in either 933 or 934 despite the date of 843 given in the text.

There is no evidence that the community at Milton followed the Benedictine rule. However it was well received by other Benedictine houses and was endowed with relics, as was customary at that time. These included a fragment of the true cross, an arm bone of St Sampson and also one of St Branwalader's. It is likely therefore that the original dedication was to St Sampson and St Branwalader, Athelstan had a particular devotion to St Sampson who came from Glamorgan; St Branwalader was St Sampson's travelling companion. When Athelstan's mother, Queen Egwynn, died he made arrangements for her to be brought to Middleton for a royal funeral in what had now become a minster. Minsters at this time were not necessarily comprised of purely of clergy but consisted of groups of people, sometimes whole families, who had come to live together in order to lead a life of prayer and contemplation. The clergy, priests and deacons, had the responsibility of providing pastoral care and spreading the Christian message throughout the land. They were obliged to live in a Christian community and often lived in a minster; these clergy were known as "seculars" as their main life was out with the secular society.

The minster community would live, work, study and pray within a compound; worshipping together in the minster church. The clergy would go off to their duties in the surrounding area meeting up again at the end of each day. At this time it was not unusual for clergy to have families who lived with them. Minster were often endowed and supported to pray for people and their leaders. These prayers were not only for current situations but also for past generosity and to atone for previous sins and misdeeds.

With no formal rule to hold the community together it was quite normal for the members of the minster and the clergy to drift apart or away from the founding ideals.

In the time of the Benedictine Monastery

In 964 King Edgar, Athelstan's nephew, caused a Benedictine Monastery under the first Abbot, Cyneward to be established at Milton, possibly alongside the existing community as happened at Worcester and possibly Sherborne. The monks followed the Rule of St Benedict which was for an enclosed community, not all of whom were ordained. This Rule is still in use today. It is set out in 73 chapters many of which deal with the daily routine of worship but others explain the organisation and ethos of the monastery. The ethos of the Rule is:

Obedience – the centrality of the practice of attending and listening to whoever and whatever is before you in the present moment – mindfulness

Stability – a commitment to stick to the chosen way and to progress within that way.

Conversio Morum – the personal development of a closer relationship with God by small steps each day, looking for growth wherever it may be found.

Balance – a rhythm that includes worship, prayer, physical work and study which allows for growth in body mind and spirit.

The monks were known for their hospitality and care for God's creation. They were expected to greet each visitor as if they were welcoming Christ himself.

Benedictine monasteries required more space than minsters as the monks lived in common accommodation within the monastery precincts. Apart from the church and living quarters there would be storage buildings and also cloisters in which to teach and copy manuscripts. It is likely that this was the spur to move the establishment further down the hill to a larger site where a church, cloisters, refectory (dining room) and dorter (dormitory) could be built to the standard layout. This new church was built to the east of the present church and was dedicated to St Mary and St Michael as well as St Sampson and St Branwalader. It would have been enclosed by a bank and hedge or wall with a gatehouse.

Though the monks were enclosed they were not totally cut off from the growing number of people who made their homes in the immediate surroundings of the monastery and as the town, soon to be called Middleton, grew the monks permitted the local to worship in the Abbey nave, even providing one of their number to be the local parish priest, effectively continuing the tradition from the earlier minster.

Over time the monastery evolved into groups of ordained brothers (monks) and lay brothers living together. This led to some tensions between those whose emphasis was on the enclosed contemplative life and those who saw their life as one of service to the community. We can see signs of this tension in the appointment of a "secular" priest as Vicar of Middleton in 1298 with responsibility for the pastoral care of the townspeople.

The daily routine of the monastery consisted of prayer seven times a day, which included recitation of the psalms and readings from the bible, periods of study and meditation as well as physical work either in the scriptorium copying manuscripts or in the many household and farming tasks which supported the monastery.

The monks of Milton Abbey were also known for the very generous alms they gave to local people

and for the care they took of the elderly and the deprived. At the time of the Dissolution they were distributing in alms nearly one tenth of their total income before taxes as well as supporting two of the King's corrodies (pensioners) who were lodged in the monastery.

In the time of the Tregonwell and Bancks Families

After the Dissolution of the monastery in 1539 John Tregonwell bought the old monastic estate and came to live in the monastery buildings. In many ways he continued the practices of the Abbots such as appointing a secular priest to care for the souls of the people of Middleton. The old monastic alms house for 13 people was turned into a self supporting charity, as was the grammar school, so they survived the Dissolution. He permitted the local population to continue to worship in the Abbey church which he now owned. However, the old custom of prayers seven times a day was discontinued and prayers were no longer said publically for the dead. With the introduction of The Book of Common Prayer the secular priest was required to say morning and evening prayer each day in the church and would celebrate daily the mass, now called Holy Communion or The Lord's Supper. But times and customs were changing and this was a very turbulent time spiritually.

During the Commonwealth period, after the Civil War and before The Restoration, the normal Anglican services were suspended and the emphasis changed from a routine of set prayers to a more free and uninhibited form of worship. The Book of Common Prayer was suspended and the services in the Abbey church were conducted according to the guidance in the Westminster Directory. Childhood baptism ceased. Much damage was done to the Abbey during this period and the Churchwardens records show that considerable amounts of rubble had to be removed and eight windows rebuilt.

At the Restoration a new Book of Common Prayer was brought into use and the routine of services restored to how they had been twenty years before. The local population continued to worship in the. The Vicar of Middleton was also the headmaster of the grammar school. Mary Tregonwell was the last of her family to own Milton Abbey. She was married to Jacob Bancks who maintained the family traditions and cared for both the Abbey and the people of Middleton. It was he who reordered the interior of the church taking down the old rotten wooden screens and opening up the building so the people could see more of the services. He also installed a gallery in the Abbey for the boys of the grammar school.

In the time of the Damer Family

When Jacob Bancks' son, also called Jacob, died Joseph Damer acquired the Abbey and the estate. At first not much changed but over time the modish desire for a private estate remote from the township took hold and Joseph Damer determined to remove the local population, alms house, grammar school and town and create an idyllic rustic scene with his house and Abbey at the centre. He created the village of Milton Abbas in a valley to the south east, not visible from his residence, and expunged the town of Middleton or Milton as it had come to be known. The new village was to house those required to tend his estates and no other trades were permitted. The spiritual heart of the community was removed to the new church of St James in The Street of Milton Abbas as the Abbey belonged to Joseph Damer and he had no wish to share it with his tenants. The charitable foundations of the alms house and the grammar school were removed to Milton Abbas and Blandford respectively by private Acts of Parliament. Thus the link between the Abbey and the

people was broken.

Joseph Damer employed James Wyatt to restore the Abbey church. In line with church thinking of the time all wall plaster and frescos were removed the damaged stone reredos was restored in new plaster. Some of the paintings of apostles which had been taken down by Jacob Bancks were removed to All Saints' Hilton. The north transept was remodelled and turned into a shrine for Caroline Damer, Joseph Damer's beloved wife.

The last member of the Damer family to own Milton Abbey was John Dawson-Damer, 2nd Earl of Portarlington who died in 1845. The estate was then sold

From the time of the Hambro Family to the present day

In 1852 Baron Hambro of Denmark bought the Milton Abbey estate, which had become rather run down. He set about improving the estate buildings, the local school and built the hospital.

In 1857 Baron Hambro's first son, Charles, married and moved with his wife into Milton Abbey House. Baron Hambro began restoring the Abbey and employed Giles Gilbert Scott who made great improvements to the building including the insertion of gas lighting and some heating. In 1867 Baron Hambro and Charles agreed by an indenture that the Vicar and villagers of Milton Abbas should have access through the grounds and the right to hold services in the Abbey church according to the rites of the Church of England, These could include baptisms and marriages, but funerals could only be held with the written permission of the owner of the mansion. By this indenture the Hambros restored the link between the local community and the Abbey church.

The Hambro connection with Milton Abbey came to an end in 1932 when the estate was sold at auction over three days. Many of the houses and farms were bought by the occupants who had been Hambro tenants but Milton Abbey house and the Abbey Church were bought by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners with the intention of turning them into a theological college. This was not to be however and eventually the Abbey church and St Catherine's Chapel were bought by the Diocese of Salisbury which continues to own the buildings. Through all these changes the rights of the Vicar and villagers of Milton Abbas as given by Baron Hambro in 1867 have been preserved.

In 1954 Milton Abbey School was established in the mansion and surrounding grounds using the Abbey church as its chapel and a venue for concerts.

The Abbey Church has been licensed for weddings since 1906 and many couples who have fallen in love with the building complete the necessary residency requirements in order to be married there. With the agreement of Milton Abbey School weddings now only take place when the school pupils are not in residence.

In 1975 the parish of Milton Abbas was joined to the parishes of Hilton, Melcombe Horsey and Cheselbourne in a united benefice. In that year the Abbey was chosen as a neutral venue for a United Carol Service on the fourth Sunday of Advent. This service, which still takes place drawing a wide congregation not only from the surrounding villages but also from further afield and has been the inspiration for other similar services and choral events.

In 1999 two services of ordination to the priesthood were conducted in the Abbey by the Bishop of Sherborne and two of the priests ordained at those services have served the local communities.

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