

Parishes and parish churches in Kent : 1291 : Introduction

How many parish churches there were in thirteenth-century England and Wales, and how much each church was worth, were questions of interest, not just to the ecclesiastical authorities, but also to the English government. From time to time, the pope was inspired to authorize the collection of a tax -- a certain fraction of the value of each church (and of each vicarage, if a vicarage existed) -- and the proceeds might, under certain conditions, be turned over to the king.

More than one attempt was made, during the thirteenth century, to find out the value of every single benefice. What came to be regarded as the definitive assessment was made in 1291-2 (Denton 1993). The list of churches compiled on that occasion remained the basis for almost all subsequent taxation, until the sixteenth century. The pope's collector had a copy; the Exchequer had a copy; if any question came up, this was the record -- "the valuation of pope Nicholaus IV" -- which had to be consulted.

There is only one version of the entire text available in print, the edition produced by the Record Commission in 1802 (Astle and Ayscough 1802). A new edition is being prepared (Denton 1997); and a database is also under construction,

<http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/taxatio/index.html>

which even in its unfinished state is already a very valuable resource.

As far as Kent is concerned, the text as it appears in the old edition seems generally reliable. Many of the place-names are badly spelt, but it is easy enough to work out which places are meant, by a process of elimination, and with the help of some intelligent guesswork. There is only one point which seems perplexing to me: it concerns the church of Lenham (see below).

Errors aside, the record is far from complete. In the version which found its way into print, it was not intended to include every church and every vicarage in existence. It was a list of the benefices which had to pay tax; and there were many which did not have to pay, for one reason or another. Three categories of data are systematically omitted. (i) A church is omitted if it was appropriated to the Templars or Hospitallers, who answered directly to the pope. (ii) A church is omitted if it belonged to a small nunnery, or to a hospital. (iii) A church or vicarage is omitted if it was valued at 6 marks or less. Thus it can happen that a church like Rodmersham fails to appear in the list. The church itself is missing because it was appropriated to the Hospitallers (and its value is unknown for that reason); the vicarage is missing because (if a later copy can be trusted) it was worth only 5 marks. Ewell (appropriated to the Templars) and Sellindge (appropriated to the Maison-Dieu of Dover) are in the same case; Seasalter is missing because neither the church nor the vicarage was valuable enough to be taxed.

To make good these deficiencies, we have to search for other evidence. For the diocese of Canterbury, it appears that several copies exist of a version or versions of this list in which the missing benefices are included (Denton 1993, pp.\ 243-4); but none of those copies is available to me. I have consulted the published registers of archbishops Pecham and Winchelsey, which record the institutions made to any benefices which happened to fall vacant in the periods 1279-92 and 1308-13 respectively, and some of the later registers as well. But the single most useful source is a version of the list incorporated into the chronicle of Willelm Thorne (BL Add 53710). It was printed by Twysden (1652, cols 2161-76), in his edition of Thorne's chronicle; from there it was translated into English by Bandinel (1813, pp 89-94), and again by Davis (1934, pp 624-41). Most of the entries for appropriated churches and small benefices which I have inserted into the list are taken from this source. I have filtered out any obvious anachronisms; but I cannot be sure that I have caught them all.

(Thorne's version dates from 1385. It raises numerous questions, but I do not propose to deal with them. There is only one large blunder. In the paragraph headed "The abbot of Pontigny", the last three lines of text are out of place. They are part of the separate list of 'Meagre benefices'; probably they ought to follow the entry for Seasalter. Their insertion here, it seems, is what caused the following paragraph to lose its heading: it ought to be "The Maison-Dieu of Dover".)

For the diocese of Rochester, there are, I gather, no copies of the text containing more entries than the printed version (Denton 1993, pp.\ 247-8); and the sequence of bishops' registers does not begin till forty years later than the Canterbury sequence. From the registers, it is possible to work out, with a high degree of confidence, how things stood in 1320 (Flight 2000). There is only one change known to me which occurred in the interval 1290-1320 -- the appropriation of Burham church to the Hospitallers in 1300 (Reg Hethe, pp 16, 325, 801). It is possible that some other changes occurred during this lapse of time; if they did, I have failed to take account of them.

Both of these lists will need to be scrutinized again, point by point, as soon as we have a new edition of the 1291 assessment. (My prediction is that few corrections will be needed; but I may live to regret saying that.) Meanwhile, as far as I can judge, the lists are accurate enough to be made available here.

It has to be remembered, of course, that things were changing all the time. At the time of this valuation, Wingham had only just been converted into a collegiate church (by archbishop Pecham), West Cliffe had only just been given to the monks of Christ Church (by queen Eleanor, who herself had acquired it only a short while before), Reculver had only just been repossessed by the archbishop (after having been appropriated by his predecessor to the hospital of St John). A few years later and the situation would be somewhat different again. Besides, even if things seem stable on the surface, it is not to be assumed that everyone was content.

The statement that I make with respect to Eastry and Monkton, "rectory (archbishop)", would have infuriated the monks of Christ Church, who thought that at least some share of the patronage ought to belong to them. The statement that I make with respect to Norton and Stourmouth, "rectory (bishop of Rochester)", would have infuriated the monks of Rochester for the same reason. In cases such as these, suppressed resentments might explode at any moment.

Many comments might be added; I restrict myself to three.

(1) Of all the churches which existed in thirteenth-century Kent, there is only one of which I cannot fix the site: the church of Pett or Pette in the deanery of Charing. I intend to put some notes on the subject into a separate file, in the hope that its title may catch someone's eye.

(2) In the text as it was printed, the section headed "Deanery of Charing" ends with two entries for Lenham (one for the church, the other for the vicarage). It is fairly certain, I think, that these entries should properly come at the start of the following section, "Deanery of Sutton". (In other words, I suspect that this heading was written in the wrong place.) Thorne's version puts Lenham in the deanery of Sutton, and so does all later evidence, as far as I am aware. But the error (if it *is* an error) got into the text at an early stage, before the totals for each deanery were added up. The man who calculated these totals was already counting Lenham in Charing deanery.

(3) It may come as a surprise to find the names of two Italian monasteries appearing in the Canterbury list. A few words of explanation follow.

The abbeys of Santa Maria sul Monte Mirteto (dioc Velletri) and Santa Maria della Gloria (dioc Anagni) each owned one parish church in the diocese of Canterbury. Both were Florentian monasteries: that is, they were dependent on the abbey of San Giovanni in Fiore, founded on a remote site in the mountains of Calabria by a renegade Cistercian monk, Gioacchino da Fiore (d 1202). The Florentian monks were sometimes regarded as a branch of the Cistercians; but they regarded themselves as an independent order, and got themselves recognized as such in 1198. They found some influential supporters: one of them was Ugolino dei conti di Segni (d 1241), born in Anagni, who as cardinal bishop of Ostia and Velletri (1206-27) was responsible for the foundation of Monte Mirteto. Ugolino was elected pope in March 1227; he took the name Gregorius IX (1227-41).

Before 1238, through emissaries sent to England, the pope had exacted promises -- from archbishop Ricard (1229-31) and from abbot Robert (1225-53). In 1238 the time arrived when those promises had to be kept. Archbishop Edmund (1234-40) gave Lydd church to La Gloria; abbot Robert gave Littlebourne church to Monte Mirteto. The monks of La Gloria benefited from another donation one year later, when the earl of Pembroke (who also had a promise to keep) gave them the church of Magor (dioc Llandaff).

These transactions are all documented in the register of Gregorius IX. (The relevant entries are summarized in the PRO's *Calendar of papal letters*, vol 1 (1893), but the index gets two things wrong. Lydd is to be looked for under "Leeds", Monte Mirteto under "Poggio Mirteto". Anyone who googles the name will know as much about Monte Mirteto as I do: the site of it is near Norma, nowhere near Poggio Mirteto.) At the Canterbury end, no contemporary registers survive. For Lydd, the earliest evidence seems to come from 1282, when archbishop Pecham ordered his commissary to inquire into the circumstances of the appropriation (Robertson 1880, p 427, citing Reg Pecham, fo 150r). For Littlebourne, the picture is much clearer, because several of the relevant documents are known from later copies (BL Cott Claudius D x, fos 41v-3r, Thorne ed Twysden 1652, cols 1879-80, 2106-8, Bandinel 1813, pp 137-8, 129).

Within a few years, as these documents prove, an agreement had been worked out between the abbot and convent of Saint Augustine's and the proctor representing the abbey and convent of Monte Mirteto (a monk of La Gloria named Deodatus). In effect this agreement meant that Monte Mirteto was relinquishing ownership of Littlebourne church in return for an annual payment of thirty marks (4800 pence). It seems safe to assume that La Gloria made some similar arrangement at about the same time -- probably with the abbey and convent of Tintern -- with regard to its two churches, Lydd and Magor. Over time, the monks of La Gloria came to think that these assets were causing more trouble than they were worth; so in 1326 they sold all their rights to the monks of Tintern (Robertson 1880, p 429, citing Reg Reynolds, fos 200r, 289v). But the monks of Monte Mirteto continued receiving their pension from St Augustine's ... (Thorne ed Twysden 1652, cols 2189-94).

If subsequent popes had followed the same policy as Gregorius IX, there is no knowing how much money might have been siphoned off from English parishes into the bank accounts of Italian monasteries. In the event, though nobody said so, it seems to have been agreed that the pope had abused his power by extorting donations in this particular way; and the practice ended, as it had begun, with him.

References

T. Astle and S. Ayscough (eds.), *Taxatio ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae auctoritate P. Nicholai IV circa A.D. 1291* (Record Commission, 1802).

B. Bandinel (ed.), *Monasticon anglicanum*, new ed., parts I-III (London, 1813).

A. H. Davis (transl.), *William Thorne's chronicle of Saint Augustine's abbey Canterbury* (Oxford, 1934).

J. H. Denton, 'The valuation of the ecclesiastical benefices of England and Wales in 1291-2', *Historical Research*, 66 (1993),

231-50.

J. H. Denton, 'Towards a new edition of the "Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae auctoritate P. Nicholai IV circa A.D. 1291"', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 79 (1997), 67-79.

C. Flight, 'Parish churches in the diocese of Rochester, c. 1320-c. 1520', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 119 (2000), 285-310.

W. A. Scott Robertson, 'Churches in Romney Marsh', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 13 (1880), 408-87.

R. Twysden (ed.), *Historiae anglicanae scriptores X ... nunc primum in lucem editi* (London, 1652).

First posted Jan 2010