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The Foundation of Nostell Priory 1109-1153

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The Foundation of Nostell Priory

1109 – 1153

There are no grand or haunting ruins to remind a modern visitor of the great Yorkshire Augustinian monastery of Nostell Priory; nothing remains which might compare to the grand gatehouses of Kirkham and Bridlington. Even the monastic complexes, probably modest compared to those of Fountains and Rievaulx, were swept away in the creation of the stately home which now bears the name Nostell Priory. But there is a richness of documents which, whilst telling us very little of the religious life within the cloister and even less of the physical description of the cloister, does give us a glimpse of the twelfth-century foundation of what became one of the richest Augustinian priories in the North of England. The foundation of Nostell Priory probably begins in the early years of the twelfth century with a community of men who lived and prayed at a chapel dedicated to St Oswald in a wood near Pontefract Castle. How did this settlement grow to become Nostell Priory? This paper is based on a recent in-depth study of the thirteenth-century cartulary of Nostell Priory augmented by information recorded in the early fifteenth-century history, now surviving as a late fifteenth early sixteenth-century copy, written by probably a canon of the house.¹

Why would twelve men *c.* 1100 choose to withdraw from their secular life and live together in a religious community? They were probably looking for the same ‘spiritual desert’ as their founding fathers of monasticism St Anthony (d. *c.* 340) and St Benedict of Nursia (d. *c.* 547) who withdrew from the secular world to seek spiritual solitude and personal encounter with God. There were similar men who sought such solitude in England, men such as St Guthlac (*c.* 674–714) and St Cuthbert (d. 687). Whilst some hermits avoided the company of others, some found they needed companions to help them maintain this spiritual life and thus coenobitic (monastic) communities developed from the original eremitical cells. The north of England can claim a number of such eremitical settlements that became religious houses: Hexham had just such an eremitical group and the hermitage of Benedict monk of Auxerre was the seed of the Benedictine Selby Abbey.² But it would be difficult to survive in any of these situations without a dependable income and the patronage or advocacy

of a powerful secular or ecclesiastical figure. Who was the patron of this eremitic community in the wood at Nostell and subsequently Nostell Priory? Was it the local baron, Robert I de Lacy, or the archbishops of York (Thomas II and Thurstan) or King Henry I? Who were the twelfth-century men and women who furnished the religious community with the land and rents to provide their income? The conclusion of this paper is that the foundation of Nostell Priory was not the act of one man but a story of men of great power and influence and of the more important members of the knightly class of twelfth-century Yorkshire.

This band of hermits in the wood dedicated to St Oswald first attracted the attention of the local baron, Robert I de Lacy lord of the honour of Pontefract who helped them with gifts of land between 1109 and 1114. At Robert's banishment from England, c. 1114, the community came to the attention of King Henry I and through his influence the *curiales* of his court and his newly created barons in the North gifted an endowment, spiritual and temporal, establishing Nostell Priory as not merely self sufficient but so firmly footed as to establish it as one of the three wealthiest Augustinian priories in the North of England. It is tempting to view this foundation through the lens of land and politics, as the sources available record acts and only hint at motivation. Any medieval religious community was, as a matter of survival, a landowner but it was first and foremost a spiritual community. The certain spiritual advisor of the house involved in the establishment of Nostell Priory was the Archbishop Thurstan of York. He played a crucial role in the development of Nostell Priory and particularly the transition from eremitical community to Augustinian monastery.

There are two particularly remarkable and unusual aspects in the foundation of Nostell Priory: the direct intervention of the king during the absence of the priory's patron at the crucial stage of transition from hermits to an Augustinian monastery and the vast endowment the house received from royal *curiales* and tenants-in-chief outside the honour of Pontefract. In other ways Nostell Priory shared many of the more normal challenges in common with its fellow Augustinian houses of the time: the turmoil during the anarchy of Stephen's reign, disaffected returning patrons, disputes over the rights of patrons and readjustment of loyalties at the beginning of the reign of King Henry II. This paper is concerned with the foundation of the priory through the lens of these two more remarkable aspects.

The Hermits in the Wood of St Oswald

No one in the middle ages lived in isolation; everyone was somehow tied to an overlord, and religious communities were no different. The wood of St Oswald, where the story begins, was in the demesne of a powerful northern baron: the lord of the Honour of Pontefract. In the first decades following the Conquest that was the de Lacy family. Ilbert I de Lacy held lands in Lassy, Calvados, for the fief of two knights from Odo, bishop of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. Ilbert I followed his lord, Bishop Odo, to England at the Conquest and he maintained his patrimony in Normandy whilst acquiring new estates in England, both held of his overlord Bishop Odo.³ Bishop Odo of Bayeux was banished from England by King William Rufus on 14 November 1088, and by 1088 × c. 1095 Ilbert I held as tenant-in-chief, direct of the king, the bulk of what had been Bishop Odo's estates in England.⁴ These estates were bounded by an area that includes modern Leeds and Bradford in the north and eastwards almost to Selby, southward to within 3 miles of Doncaster and west across to Penistone and Thurlston and back to Bradford via Huddersfield. In fact, Ilbert I held directly from the king for knight service almost the entire 500 square miles of the south of Yorkshire with only two exceptions: the royal manor of Wakefield, remaining in the king's demesne, and a small enclave of Warmfield. But even Warmfield was held by Ilbert I de Lacy from the Archbishop of York.⁵ There were also lands in Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Surrey. Of import to the hermits who would settle in the wood near Ilbert's *caput* of Pontefract the Domesday Book records that Ilbert I de Lacy held in chief of the king in the West Riding all of the land surrounding, and indeed the very wood of St Oswald, that is to say the parishes of Featherstone, Purston [Jaglin], and [West] Hardwick.⁶ Ilbert I did not found a monastery in England but he did endow a church within his castle. Later documents record the grants of parish tithes by Ilbert I de Lacy and his knights to the chapel of St Clement located in the castle of Pontefract. Some of the knights who joined him in this enterprise were later benefactors of the hermits of Nostell: Ralph le Gramaire and Ernulf de Preston.⁷

At Ilbert I de Lacy's death (c. 1091 × 1100) his son and heir Robert I de Lacy was considered 'one of the most powerful of the barons in Yorkshire.'⁸ Robert I acted on occasion as the king's agent in Yorkshire and he is addressed or attests numerous royal writs regarding Yorkshire as late as at least 1108 ×

1113.⁹ During the reign of William Rufus, and *c.* 1090, Robert I de Lacy founded the Cluniac monastery at Pontefract dedicated to St John the Evangelist. In his foundation charter for the monastery of St John he recorded his substantial gifts of the site of their monastery, that is the hospital of St Nicholas where they were living, and his demesne land in Brakenhill, Whitwood and elsewhere, four churches and three chapels. He also confirmed gifts of two of his knights/tenants: William I Foliot gave a bovate of land in Pontefract and Swain son of Ailric granted the church of Silkstone; both of these men figure in the later endowment of Nostell Priory.¹⁰

We cannot say when a religious settlement began living in the woods between Foulby and Wragby but it is clear that they were there perhaps as early as 1109 and certainly before February 1114. A tantalising but puzzling glimpse of the earliest eremitical stage of Nostell Priory is provided by the antiquarian John Burton reporting a charter in the Cox Macro collection (now no longer traceable) that records a grant of the manor of Nether-Sutton from Robert I de Lacy and his wife Mabel and their sons Ilbert II and Henry I de Lacy to Gilbert the hermit of St James of Nostell and brethren of the same house.¹¹ The earliest date of this gift would be based on Robert I de Lacy's succession to the honour of Pontefract in 1091 × 1100.¹² John Burton was notorious for his transcription mistakes (Mabel is probably intended for Matilda and Ilbert II de Lacy is described as Gilbert), so we have no way of confirming the authenticity of this document. However it could just be an early reference to the eremitical community before it was dedicated to St Oswald.

Is it possible to explain why a hermitage dedicated to St James would become dedicated to St Oswald and thus further support the association?¹³ Probably not conclusively; however, it is intriguing to note that around the time of the foundation of Nostell Priory there was a renewed veneration of St Oswald, king and martyr. This renewed veneration began when in Durham Cathedral on 24 August 1104 the body of St Cuthbert was translated to his new shrine and with the incorrupt body of St Cuthbert was found the head of St Oswald, king and martyr.¹⁴ Was the original Nostell community dedicated to St James and subsequent to the renewed fervour for the Anglo-Saxon king and martyr rededicated to St Oswald? It can only be speculation. Gilbert and his brethren may be the early members of the eremitical community under study here, the hermits in the wood of St Oswald or possibly another hermitage within the honour of Pontefract. At a minimum the document suggests that

the de Lacy family would have actively supported an eremitical settlement and that such a hermit did come to their attention.

There are no surviving documents (neither copies nor originals) recording the personal grants of Robert I de Lacy to the community although there is mention of the gifts he and his knights made in the royal confirmation of King Henry I in 1122.¹⁵ For example the King's confirmation states that Robert I de Lacy granted the religious men the land where they were living, that was called 'Nostlet' and the wood called 'St Oswald' for assarting. The same document suggests Robert I de Lacy approved the gift of his knights Ralph le Gramaire [*Grammaticus*] who granted 2 bovates of land in Hardwick.

There is a separate document that records the grant and dedication of a church dedicated to St Oswald for the use of the canons that was given either by Robert himself or by his knight Amfrey of Featherstone.¹⁶ This document provides a number of morsels of information about the transition from an informal community in the wood to a more structured community following a 'rule' but the surviving copy of the document itself is perplexing.¹⁷ There are no other contemporary sources to tell when the members of the eremitical community at Nostell adopted a 'rule' or the title of 'canon'. This document in the Nostell Cartulary can be dated to 1109 × 1114 when they were called 'canons serving God according to a rule' (*canonici regulariter Deo ibi servant*). It records an agreement supervised by Thomas II archbishop of York between the priest of Featherstone, the monks of La Charité (a reference to the fact that the Cluniac monastery of St John of Pontefract was a dependency of La Charité sur Loire) and the clerics of St Oswald (*clerici sancti Oswaldi*). The agreement provided to the clerics of St Oswald a church and a cemetery for their use and the use of their servants at the place where they lived called 'Nostlet' (*canonici regulariter Deo ibi servant et habeant cimiterium ad opus suum et servientium suorum omniumque iuxta eos habitantium in terra que dicitur Nostlet*). This agreement suggests that the church of Featherstone had previously claimed the church and that the associated ecclesiastical custom was in the gift of the monastery of La Charité.¹⁸

Robert I de Lacy and his knight Amfrey of Featherstone were probably present at the dedication ceremony of this church as described in the document. The ceremony was probably conducted by Archbishop Thomas II of York, and although the document at hand was undated by year it does state that it was recorded at the dedication of a church to St Oswald on his feast day, 5