

A Surprise Discovery at Langdon Abbey

— Tim Boyton-Adams —

Dover and the immediate surrounding area had its fair share of religious houses during the Middle Ages – the Domus Dei or God's House, the Collegiate Church of St. Martin le Grand, the Priory of St. Mary the Virgin and St. Martin, St. Radigund's Abbey – and Langdon Abbey. All were closed during the course of the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII and his Chief Secretary and Vicar-General, Thomas Cromwell, 1st Earl of Essex (c1485-1540).

The National Archives contain many letters written to Thomas Cromwell by his agents during this tumultuous period of English history – and his agents were, by and large, Tudor 'self-made' men (like Cromwell himself) who carved careers for themselves in loyal service to the crown. Many were churchmen, anxious for the reform of what were considered by some to be 'superstitious' and 'idolatrous' practices within the pre-Reformation Church. One such agent was Dr. Richard Layton (c1500-1544), educated at Cambridge, from where he graduated in 1522, afterwards taking Holy Orders, and then entering the service of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, where he met Thomas Cromwell. Layton ultimately became Cromwell's principal agent during the mid-1530s, visiting many monasteries and reporting to his master on what he had found at each, in a string of letters that today survive in the National Archives at Kew. Layton's service was typical of many during this period and he appears to have been a 'career' churchman, holding many benefices and livings, ultimately becoming Dean of York.

The visitation of the monasteries had one aim – to ascertain their wealth, following King Henry's break with Rome in 1534. Layton and other commissioners were commissioned by Cromwell to question each monk, nun and friar, in every monastery and friary in the land, to judge the 'religious health' of each house – and of course, to record details of their possessions and income. Layton, by and large,

concentrated his work in the South and East of England, ultimately managing the surrender of various abbeys and priories during the mid to late 1530s. One such monastery that he visited was Langdon Abbey, situated at West Langdon, just East of Dover – a Premonstratensian house of White Canons, founded by William de Auberville (the elder) and his wife Matilda (or Maud) de Glanville, daughter of Ranulf de Glanville, Chief Justiciar of England to Henry II, in around 1192. The abbey was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Thomas of Canterbury and held extensive lands, which by 1491 extended to 300 acres. Very little of the abbey remains today, but extensive 12th century vaulted cellars remain as part of a later house built on the site, now in private hands.

In October 1535, Layton paid an unexpected visit to Langdon Abbey and his letter to Thomas Cromwell has the following account (the spelling has been modernised):

'Please it your goodness to understand that on Friday 22nd October I rode back with speed to take an inventory of Folkestone (priory), and from thence went to Langdon. Whereas immediately descending from my horse, I sent Bartelot your servant, with all my servants to circumcept (inspect) the house the abbey, and surely keep all back doors and starting holes (private entrances) etc. I myself went alone to the abbot's lodging joining upon the fields and woods, even like a cony clapper (a rabbit's burrow) full of private ways; a good space knocking at the abbot's door, neither sound nor sign of life appearing, saving the abbot's little dog, that within his door fast locked, bayed and barked. I found a short pole-axe ... and with it I dashed the abbot's door in pieces, and set one of my men to keep (guard) that door, and about [the] house I go with the pole-axe in my hand, for the abbot is a dangerous desperate knave and a hardy. But for a conclusion, his whore alias his gentlewoman bestirred her stumps towards her starting hole (private entrance), and there Bartelot

watching the pursuit took the tender damsel, and after I had examined (questioned) her, to Dover there to the mayor to set her in some cage or prison for eight days, and I brought holy father abbot to Canterbury, and there to Christchurch (the Cathedral priory) I will leave him in prison. In this sudden doing extempore, to circumcept (inspect) the house and to search, your servant John Antony and his men marvelled what fellow I was, and so did the rest of the abbey, for I was unknown there of all men. At last I found her apparel in the abbot's coffer (chest). To tell you all this comedy, but for the abbot a tragedy, it were too long. Now it shall appear to gentlemen of this country, and other the commons, that ye shall not deprive or visit upon substantial grounds. Surely I suppose God himself put it in my mind thus suddenly to make a search at the beginning, because no canon appeared in my sight; I supposed rather to have found a whore amongst them in the abbot's chamber...'

Just to put this into context - one of the agents'

injunctions to male religious houses laid down that 'there be no entrance into this monastery but one, and that by the great fore-gate of the same, which diligently shall be watched and kept by some porter specially appointed for that purpose, and shall be shut and opened by the same both day and night, at convenient and accustomed hours, which porter shall repel all manner of women from entrance into the said monastery.'

Langdon Abbey was subsequently dissolved in the first round of monastic closures for houses with incomes of less than £200 per annum - its annual income stood at only £56. The last abbot, William Sayer (the very one imprisoned by Layton at Canterbury) signed the Deed of Surrender, along with ten canons - the document survives today in the National Archives at Kew and has a very fine impression of the abbey seal attached to it - one side showing an image of the Blessed Virgin and Child, the other the martyrdom of St. Thomas. Sic transit gloria mundi...

Curiosity of Dover

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