

THE FOUNDING OF SOUTHWELL MINSTER

A lecture given in the Minster, on 22nd September 1956, by Sir Frank Stenton,
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The evidence which carries back the foundation of this Church to the year 956, has only been preserved by a narrow margin. If a single clerk in the employment of the Dean and Chapter of York who was copying their records in the 14th century had confined himself to the documents which he could read and understand there would remain no trace of the events which have been celebrated in Southwell this year. Most fortunately, with the unreflecting industry of his kind, he attempted to copy all that lay before him. He therefore reproduced as accurately as his knowledge of ancient writing would permit, the text of the charter by which, some 400 years before his time, Eadwig, King of the English, had granted Southwell to Oskytel, Archbishop of York. It is this Charter with which the recorded history of Southwell begins.

In Old English times, as afterwards, a Charter, royal or private, was a legal instrument, and the legal object of the Southwell Charter is clear. It was intended to set the Archbishop of York in the exact position which the King himself had previously held in relation to Southwell, and it tells nothing of the religious foundation which it was probably expected that the Archbishop would establish here. If it had done so, the Charter would have been condemned out of hand as a forgery. But it goes into some details of the kind of property which passed to the Archbishop and these details are of some interest both for local and general history. For the Charter covers not only Southwell itself but a whole group of neighbouring villages. It gives to the Archbishop not only Southwell, but also Halloughton, Gibsmere, Upton, Morton, Goverton, Bleasby and Kirlington. It gives him every third acre in the fields of Normanton, every sixth acre and the holdings of three peasants in Halam, two thirds of Fiskerton and the holdings of four peasants, and the holdings of two peasants in Farnsfield. A property which included so many villages and parts of villages was hard to administer, and it could never have been easy to hold it together in a single estate. Manors of this type always tended to disintegrate. The estate centred on Southwell which passed to the Archbishop in 956 was neither a geographical nor an economic unity. What preserved it as a whole during the Middle Ages and into modern times was its subjection to a court of justice held for the whole property by the Archbishop. It is very significant that the Charter explicitly states that the lands belonging to Southwell in all the villages which it names were to be held by the Archbishop with rights of jurisdiction. Such rights are rarely mentioned in charters of any period and the Southwell Charter seems to be the first piece of unequivocal evidence for the existence of private courts of justice in England. In view of the importance of manorial courts in social history the fact that Southwell was granted such an institution in 956 makes the Charter conferring it of peculiar importance. If a list in order of time were made of English manors known to be provided with manorial courts, the manor of Southwell would have a good claim to be regarded as the first of all.

Before one passes from the actual property of which the Archbishop became

possessed in 956 it should be added that some of these villages are defined in the Charter by a succession of boundary points, set out in the Anglo-Saxon language with which the clerk who copied the Charter in the 14th century was not well acquainted. It is very hard to trace these boundaries but some names, familiar to us today, appear in them quite unmistakably. Hazelford was one of these boundary points; Hockerwood was another; Micklebarrow beside the road from Southwell to Newark was a third and there are some others. In fact, the Charter leaves little doubt that in 956 the general layout of this part of England in villages was substantially that which we know today.

The grant of Southwell to the Archbishop of York in 956 was an event of much more historical and social significance than the mere gift of an estate, however large, by a king to an Archbishop. In the year 956 it was still uncertain whether, or under what conditions, England would become a single united kingdom. It was also equally uncertain how far an organised form of Christianity could be maintained in the northern and eastern parts of the country of which Nottinghamshire is one. For nearly a century before the year of 956 this region had been raided and largely settled by heathen invaders from the Scandinavian north. The first invaders were Danes from Jutland and the Baltic coastlands and their settlements in the country immediately around Southwell have left many traces in names still familiar such as Bleasby and Bilsthorpe, Eakring and Kelham. After a short interval these Danes were followed by Norwegians from the Scandinavian colonies previously established in Ireland and by adventurers from all parts of the Scandinavian world.

Until two years before the grant of Southwell to Archbishop Oskytel, Erik, son of Harold Fairhair, King of Norway, was reigning in York as a heathen king, surrounded by heathen followers, and ruling over a kingdom which extended from Bawtry to Catterick and from the Humbermouth to Leeds. Inevitably, under these conditions, the whole organisation of the Church collapsed. The ancient Bishop's Seat which had previously existed at Leicester disappeared and never appeared again. The still more venerable diocese which represented the ancient kingdom of Lindsey vanished so entirely that the site of its cathedral cannot now be identified. The See of York survived at least in name. An Archbishop was consecrated for York in the year 900, but his consecration took place not at York or in the north, but at London, and nothing more whatever is known about him. It is not known when or where he died.

A quarter of a century passed after the year 900 before the continuous succession of Archbishops of York began again. For a long time the position of the Archbishop must have been almost intolerable. It caused Archbishop Wulstan, the first Archbishop of this period who is more than a name, to go to the length of allying himself with the contemporary Norwegian King of York against the Saxon King of England. For this he was arrested and imprisoned for a time in southern England. He was restored to his rank, and what little can have remained of his authority, some three years before his death, but most of the lands which had supported his predecessors had passed into alien hands and his venerable churches of York, Beverley and Ripon though they survived or seem to have survived were miserably impoverished. Most of these details refer in the first instance to Yorkshire, but they can certainly be taken as illustrating the general situation in this part of England at the time when Southwell passed to Oskytel, Archbishop of

York.

As to the relations between the native population of this country and the heathen around them, there is really nothing which can be said to much profit. The heathen Danes and Norwegians were not aggressive in their heathenism. There are no martyrs for Christianity in this piece of history, and on the whole the Scandinavian invaders came to accept the Christian religion with comparatively little difficulty. On the other hand King Erik who was reigning at York two years before the grant of Southwell, was himself an uncompromising heathen, and some of the most characteristic pieces of Scandinavian heathen verse which have survived relate directly to him. It is worth remembering that as late as the year 954 a highly born and brilliant Norwegian prince had been in power at York and if he saw fit, at any moment might have come into power in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire and the counties adjacent. But in 954 King Erik was overthrown by his northern enemies and Northumbria passed under English rule.

In the last days of 955 Archbishop Wulstan died, and the way was open for the leaders of the English Church and State in the south to attempt the restoration of ecclesiastical order in the north. In 956, Oskytel, Bishop of Dorchester-on-Thames, was translated to York. The grant of Southwell which he received before the end of the year and the annexation of Nottinghamshire to the Archbishopric of York which this grant implies mark the beginning of an attempt to re-establish the northern archbishopric in a manner enabling him to maintain himself thenceforward in security and independence. That is the real importance in English history of the events which have been celebrated in Southwell this year. They began the restoration of ecclesiastical rule, law and order in a part of England which from a time which was then beyond living memory had generally been subject to alien domination, and sometimes to direct heathen rule.

Archbishop Oskytel ruled at York for 15 years and little is recorded about them. But the few facts that are known about him suggest, and perhaps more than suggest, that he was successful in raising the Archbishopric to a position of dignity and influence in the north. He was himself of Danish descent. The name Oskytel, which some may regard as strange and uncouth, is an English adaptation of a well-known Scandinavian name. It is safe to say that a man who bore this name in the first half of the 10th century was of Scandinavian origin, and this is important. It meant that Archbishop Oskytel was of one race with the leading element among the landowners, the nobility, the fighting men of his diocese. He would not have been regarded as an alien at York. In these 15 years he kept in touch with the kings of the royal house of England who were his ultimate protectors. From one of them he received another large estate in Nottinghamshire at Sutton-cum-Barnby Moor which established him in the north of the county as the previous grant of Southwell had already established him in the centre. He used his own property for the purchase of land in Yorkshire, getting some of it from friendly noblemen and others from the king. And he continuously asserted his claim to the lands which his see had lost in the previous century of trouble.

It is much more remarkable that he was able to enforce at least an elementary form of marriage law on the formidable Scandinavian nobility of Yorkshire. One of the estates which he obtained for his see actually came to him by forfeiture for misconduct of this kind. This fact is only recorded quite

incidentally as is so much else about the history of this time, but the more it is considered, the more remarkable it seems. Ecclesiastical law could not have been enforced in the time before him by an Archbishop who was in prison in southern England for high treason. Its establishment by Archbishop Oskytel proves the reality of his power in the north. On the whole it is probable that the permanent establishment of religious order and of the civilization, which was its accompaniment in this part of England, was due to the character, energy and ability of Archbishop Oskytel. If this is so, the founder of Southwell Minster may fairly be placed among the greatest churchmen who have ever held the See of York.

All the same it should be admitted that there were narrow limitations to his success. It is significant that after his death in 971 his successor, an Englishman named Ethelwold, resigned his See, perhaps even before the consecration, because, as we are told, "he preferred a more quiet life". A century after his time there was still little difference in dress and manners and conduct between the clergy and laity of the north. Moreover, northern Christianity was for long encumbered with heathen practices and its culture had for long a barbarian cast. The carvings in stone, all too few of them, which have survived to be its chief memorials, are in no way comparable with the great works of this class which have come down from an earlier time. The most remarkable of them is a fragment of a cross at Shelford by the Trent, showing the Virgin and Child on one face and a bearded Archangel with six wings on the other. In execution it has been called an admirable piece of work, but the barbaric figure of the Archangel would certainly have revolted the contemporary practitioners of religious art in southern England. A better known carving of this period, the Southwell tympanum, draws the vitality which makes it famous from the Scandinavian north, and is in no way in line with the tradition of earlier English sculpture.

Under all these circumstances, it is unlikely that Oskytel could have carried through any work of religious foundation on a large scale at Southwell. That he caused the building of a church suitable for his official seat may be taken as certain, as may his recruitment of a group of clergy large enough to secure a due routine of service there. By 1020, at latest, the Minster at Southwell by the River Trent had become a site to which pilgrims might wish to be directed. It contains the relics of an Anglo-Saxon female saint named Eadburgh who, as yet, has not been conclusively identified. Evidence for an Archbishop's house at Southwell goes back to 1051 when Archbishop Aelfric is recorded to have died there. At some time within the next ten years a gift of bells was made to the church by Archbishop Cynesige. In all this, though there may be proof of continuity, there is nothing to suggest the existence of an elaborate religious establishment at Southwell. The estates possessed by the Church of Southwell in the 11th century, give the same impression. They comprised a small tenancy under the Archbishop, within the manor of Southwell, a manor worth six pounds a year at Norwell, another manor of half that value at Cropwell Bishop and a few small pieces of land elsewhere; as at Woodborough where a clerk was supported by some twenty acres held from the Archbishop. The community was no doubt sufficient to maintain a due course of service within the Minster but its numbers cannot have been large.

For a century after the foundation of the Minster nothing is known about the constitution of the body of clergy which served it. But it is recorded that

Ealdred, the last English Archbishop of York, the man who crowned Harold II and William the Conqueror, that he bought many estates with his own money and with some of them made prebends at Southwell. He is also said to have built a refectory at Southwell where the Canons might eat together. This points to an attempt on his part to impose a communal way of life on the clergy serving the Minster, such as was common abroad, and was carried out more elaborately by Ealdred himself at Beverley. But nothing further is known of this design at Southwell. The medieval Chapter of Southwell is essentially a college of clergy, each supported in the main by the revenues drawn from a single estate or prebend. This was the pattern generally followed in English Cathedral Churches of the Old Foundation, and Domesday Book, which refers incidentally to certain lands at Southwell as forming a prebend, proves that the system was in being here in 1086. Southwell, in fact, is one of the churches in which the prebendal system can most clearly be traced back to the age of the Norman Conquest. But none of the prebends of Southwell can be called wealthy and there is a sharp and significant contrast between these modest endowments and the high average value of the canonries created by the formidable bishops who founded the new cathedral church at Lincoln.

The utmost that can be said about the first Minster of Southwell amounts to no more than a background to the history of the great church in which we are met this afternoon. It came into being gradually in the course of the 12th and 13th centuries and it reflects the new energy and power of concrete achievement which came upon the English Church in the generations after the Norman Conquest. This second Minster was the work of men preoccupied with the needs of their own time with little, if any, interest in the Saxon basis of their foundation. But the community grouped around the Norman Minster was still in its essential constitution the community which Archbishop Oskytel may be presumed to have founded, and which Archbishop Ealdred had wished to reform. The Norman rulers of the English Church were formidable individuals, but they had the statesman's merit of recognising the impossible when they met it. No medieval Archbishop ever attempted to convert the individualistic Canons of Southwell into an organised Chapter of the Norman type, with a Dean, a precentor, a chancellor, treasurer and sub-dean, each with his statutory rank in the community, his well-defined functions and his separate endowment. It is this impression of an institution yielding from time to time to external authority but preserving its fundamental character through all changes which gives its peculiar interest to the history of the Church of Southwell.

Today the ancient Minster survives. The ancient Chapter has passed beyond living memory, but the physical environment of Southwell Minster, its remoteness from the main lines of travel, the succession of ancient prebendal houses fronting it on the north and west, even the layout of the town has never quite enveloped it, all these speak clearly enough of its Saxon origins. It is a genuine continuity over a thousand years of recorded history which Southwell has been celebrating this year.