

# THE PRIORY & PARISH CHURCH OF ST. MARY, BRADENSTOKE

## The Priory



The Priory was situated in the parish of Lyneham near the village of Bradenstoke-cum-Clack, on a high ridge of land overlooking the Avon valley. A good site with several springs and a holy well.

The building itself consisted of a narrow nave 24 feet in width and 126 feet long. This may have been because of the incorporation of an older chapel within the building. The church was unusual in that it was on the south side of the cloister again possibly due to the siting of an older chapel.

Little more is known of the buildings. The Prior's lodging was demolished in the early part of the 19th century. The western range of the cloister including the guest house, was completely removed as well as the great Tithe Barn to St. Donat's Castle at Llantwit Major, Glamorganshire by William Randolph Hearst the American Newspaper Magnate who had made the castle his home. It is doubtful whether it was re-erected although there is a Bradenstoke Hall within the current castle buildings. The last official news of the removed buildings was that they had been crated and had been advertised for sale just before World War II in a New York Journal. Perhaps one day the crates will be found and their significance realised and the buildings rebuilt for future generations to enjoy their history. At present all that is left of the Priory are two 14th century undercrofts and a tower all in a decaying state.

The Priory had a quiet history with interesting contacts. It was founded in 1139 by Walter Le Eurus father of the First Earl of Salisbury, among the endowments he made with the 'vill of Bradenstoke and the church (i.e. Lyneham). Upon the death of his wife he became a canon of the house, and on his death was buried with her in the choir of the church. His son Walter became a canon as did two grandsons, children of Earl Patrick. The close connection of the Priory and family continued for at least a century and then the patronage passed by marriage to the Duchy of Lancaster.

The early Angevin Kings showed special favour towards Bradenstoke, royal charters, extra endowments, much help in freeing it from claims made by the mother convent at Cirencester, finally settled by King John. King John visited Bradenstoke often and gave many gifts, wine from Bristol, cattle and pasture for example. John in a will made in 1203 at Marlborough, left many valuable gifts of jewels and furnishings to the priory, but it is not known whether these were ever received.

Henry III also proved a generous benefactor, the priory was put under royal protection and released from many taxes and customary payments and a royal charter was granted for a fair at Bradenstoke for five days from September 5th, the Eve of the Nativity of the Virgin. Much wood was given for furnishings and building work. In 1361 Edward III gave licence to the Priory for a weekly market at Bradenstoke. All these helping to increase the income of the Priory.

In 1352 Prior Thomas Spicer caused the priory distress by his crimes: their Patron, Edward the Black Prince, put others in charge and in 1353 Spicer was made to resign. One of the canons, Geoffrey Besiles, was made Prior but got into debt in 1367. He was deprived of office because of 'fraud and malice'.

On June 20th , 1285 John Pecham, Archbishop of Canterbury stayed at Bradenstoke.

The Priory's chief holdings were mainly in Wiltshire. Others of great value were in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Dorset. An enormous list of such properties and their income values is given in the Victoria History of Wiltshire Volume III.

On the eve of Dissolution the Priory was a well ordered house in its spiritual and temporal life.

In August 1535, John ap Price, Cromwell's Commissioner reported to his master that nothing could be found "after diligent inquisition" against the Prior, but 2 or 3 of the convent (probably not the canons as he does not say so) were convicted of incontinence. At that time there were 13 canons in residence with the prior.

The Priory was dissolved on 17th January 1539.

Net income from all sources was £212 0s. 3d in 1535, a good income for a small priory at that time.

Prior William Snow received a life pension of £60 per annum; the sub prior £8; the canons pensions between £5. 6s. 8d and 40s. He was appointed the first Dean of the new cathedral at Bristol in 1552 and the priory's possessions at Marden given to the cathedral. He was obviously in favour with the commissioners, probably because he did not fight the order of Dissolution, as many did.

Canon James Cole became incumbent of Lyneham with the salary of £6 13s. 4d. together with the small tithes.

A fine conventional seal survives on a 13th century deed of the time of Prior Geoffrey showing the Virgin and Child under an elaborate pinnacled canopy with a censing angel either side. The Prior's seal was also a pointed oval, under a canopy with a half-length figure of the Virgin and Child standing on a trefoiled arch under which the Prior is kneeling in prayer.

## **The Parish Church**

The present church at Bradenstoke was built in 1866 and was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, as was the priory.

The building was designed by C. F. Hansom in the decorated style and was built in stone at the expense of Gabriel Goldney who died in 1900. The building consists of chancel, nave and north aisle with a stone bell cote at the west end of the nave. The interior is enriched with carved stonework and the carved font is said to have been exhibited at the Exhibition of 1862.

The church plate, dated 1862, comprises a flagon chalice paten and plate all presented by Mrs. Gabriel Goldney at the opening of the church in 1866.

In the forecourt of the church, in front of the church wall stands the remains of an ancient stone cross, now carrying a war memorial plaque.

The church and parish has now once more been encompassed within the parish of Lyneham. It existed as a separate parish only between 1866 and 1927.

