

THE LOLLARD DISESTABLISHMENT BILL AND ROCESTER, STAFFORDSHIRE

THE Lollard Disendowment Bill, presented to parliament in 1407 or (more probably) 1410, is well known to historians. Its plan of confiscating Church temporalities and using them for social, military, and educational purposes (including the founding of fifteen universities) has been seen as anticipating that of Henry VIII.¹ Its fate was described by McFarlane. 'After allowing Henry IV 20,000 a year, the sponsors reckoned that there would still be enough to endow fifteen new earls, 1,500 new knights and 6,200 new esquires. The arithmetic of the scheme was faulty, but it was unacceptable for other reasons. The King for one utterly repudiated its anti-clericalism; his trusted servant John Norbury delighted the monasteries by urging Arundel to crush these heretics; and the Prince of Wales was hostile. Even that part of the Lollards' programme most calculated to tempt the avarice of laymen could no longer be relied upon to earn them a hearing.'²

This tract before the times includes the following clause on bishops and abbeys to be disendowed: 'Of the bisshop of Chestre with the abbey there and Bannastre, and of the bisshop of London, Seint Daudid, Salysbury and Excetre xx m^l marcis'.³ 'Bannastre' here has been a crux. Anne Hudson describes its location as 'uncertain', but notes that MS Harley 3775 has *Remest* and the St

¹ David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England: The End of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1955), 107-8; *English Historical Documents 1327-1485*, ed. A. R. Myers (London, 1969), 668-70; Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers* (London, 1984), 21.

² K. B. McFarlane, *Wycliffe and English Non-Conformity* (Harmondsworth, 1972), 139-40.

³ *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge, 1978), 136.

Alban's Chronicle *Roucestre*, 'possibly Rocester priory, Staffs., as suggested by Galbraith.⁴

This problem is one of place-name scholarship. The first edition of Ekwall's dictionary, which records Rocester as *Rowecestre* in Domesday Book, *Roucestre* in 1208, and *Rovecestre* in 1225, probably came out too late for Galbraith to use it.⁵ Yet these forms leave no doubt. The Lollard Disendowment Bill refers to Rocester abbey in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, its name appearing correctly in the St Albans Chronicle as *Roucestre*. The house at Rocester, four miles north of Uttoxeter (SK 1039), was of Augustinian or Black Canons (like many others mentioned in the Lollard Bill) and was founded in 1141 x 1146 by Richard Bacon, a nephew of Ranulph, earl of Chester.⁶

Since the '*Bannestre*', '*Remest*', and '*Roucestre*' of the Lollard Disestablishment Bill surely refer to Rocester, the work of place-name scholars would here normally be done. But perhaps something may be said of the house to suggest why its name was corrupted, thus for so long puzzling historians.

In their rule the Black Canons resembled the Benedictines, though their ideal was less austere.⁷ Sir Richard Southern placed the order neatly, describing it as one of 'compromise', with 'modest and inexpensive virtues'.⁸ Rocester abbey (of which nothing survives above ground) had only local importance; the obscurity of the house may explain the corruption '*Bannastre*' in pamphlet versions of the bill. Nevertheless, Rocester attracted hostile attention from Lollards, and the Victoria County History here suggests why. Though its patronage went to the Crown in 1246 on the annexation of the

⁴ Hudson, 206.

⁵ Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1936), 371; *The St Alban's Chronicle*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (Oxford, 1937), 52-5.

⁶ *The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales 940-1216*, ed. David Knowles & al. (Cambridge, 1972), 182.

⁷ J. C. Dickinson, *Monastic Life in Medieval England* (London, 1961), 77.

⁸ R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism* (Oxford, 1970), 216.

earldom of Chester, the abbey was dogged by poverty. It also had a troubled communal life. In 1375 one of its canons, Richard of Foston, was said to be wandering from place to place posing as abbot of Rocester; in 1385 there was an order for the arrest of three of its canons, including a Richard Foster who may be the Richard of Foston above. The abbots of Rocester had other tribulations. One of them, John Cheswardine, was accused of harbouring men guilty of homicide, though by 1385 he had established his innocence. Of special significance for the Lollard Disestablishment Bill is a dispute concerning abbot Henry Smyth. Some of the Rocester canons challenged his election, which was yet confirmed by the bishop in 1407 and (after an appeal) the archbishop of Canterbury in 1408; despite this, the temporalities of Rocester were not restored by the Crown until the archbishop had given his decision.⁹ So the house had a poor reputation. Hence, it seems, its appearance in the Lollard Disestablishment Bill.

It thus seems quite certain from the above that '*Bannastre*' (presumably a corruption of '*Roucestre*') and '*Remest*' (probably from '*Roucest*') in the Lollard Disestablishment Bill of 1407 x 1410 refer to Rocester abbey, Staffordshire. We here thus vindicate Galbraith's identification of 1937, as well as indicating reasons why the community at Rocester should attract unfavourable attention in the Lollard Disendowment Bill.

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⁹ *A History of the County of Stafford*, volume iii, ed. M. W. Glenslade (London, 1970), 247-51. For help here the writer thanks Dr N. J. Tringham of Keele University.

