

Wantage Church History

by Lis Garnish

Looking at Wantage Church today it is hard to imagine a time when it did not exist, when there was only a grassy field or a small wooden church, but at some point in the past there was no church here and no Christianity in England. The building which we see today has a long and varied history, but it was not the first church in Wantage, although it probably stands on the same site. It is mainly 14th and 15th century, with a Victorian re-building of the west end, but the architecture can take us back a little further than that. Most of the central tower and parts of the north and south transepts are 13th century, built sometime in the 1200s (1). Can we go back any further using other evidence?



Parish Church, Wantage

Domesday Book provides the next link back in the chain of evidence. The entry for the King's land in Wantage records a church with an unusually large endowment of 5 hides, about 600 acres (2). There were seven villagers and seven cottagers to work the land, just under half of which was ploughed. They had a mill to which they must take their grain for grinding, and some meadow to cut for winter hay. The income from this 'estate' was reckoned to have been £4 5s in 1066. The church which this income helped to support would not have been the one we see today, but may have been the 'chappelle' which Leyland saw standing in the churchyard in 1540 and which probably became the Latin or Grammar School (3).

But for how long before 1066 had there been a church? The next step back takes us to 997 when Aethelred II and his council met in Wantage and issued the 'Wantage Code', a formal recognition of legal customs and practices in part of the Danelaw (4). It was remarkable for the mention of juries of twelve leading thegns, who would bring to trial

guilty persons and arrest 'all men of bad repute' involved in disputes. Wantage was the centre of a royal estate, suitable to house the king and his council, so it seems likely that such an important centre must have had a church to provide for the spiritual needs of the court. Maybe it was the same simple building which the Normans saw, or perhaps a smaller, simpler stone building on the same site.

The next step back is a smaller one - to about the year 950 when the Lady Wynflaed made her will (5). She was probably a member of the royal family and may have taken the veil at Shaftesbury (6). She had a large estate to dispose of, scattered over southern England, and she asked the permission of the King, Eadred, to leave "soul-scot" to Wantage. "Soul-scot", so Finberg tells us, "arose as a voluntary offering, made by a dead man's heirs. It consisted of a portion of his goods offered to the parish priest. The amount varied in proportion to the wealth of the deceased, and its purpose was to secure prayers for his soul" (7). Soul-scot could only be left to a church with a graveyard, so this is the earliest proof that we have of a church and graveyard at Wantage. Also from the 10th century comes part of a cross shaft, which was recovered from the rubble when the Latin School was demolished in 1850 (8). Whether it was used as part of the building, or buried in the foundations when the school building was erected, is not known.

Going back any further involves speculation, but two points can be made. Firstly, Alfred was born in Wantage in 849, whilst the King and his court were on progress round the royal manors (9). Wessex had regained control over the Upper Thames area sometime in the previous few years and a royal progress was a normal way to gather and consume the produce due from royal estates, and to dispense the King's justice. As with Aethelred's council meeting it seems likely that a settlement which was the head of a Hundred, and important enough to entertain the King and his council. whilst business was transacted and law enforced, must have had a church.

The second point is the size of the endowment. It seems certain that Wantage must have been a 'minster' church, that is one with a community of priests who served the surrounding area (10). Such 'ordinary minsters' were established as missionary centres and would be amongst the earliest Christian centres in a district. The area of the Upper Thames had been Christianized by 670 and it is possible that by then Wantage had a small wooden church, served by a community of priests.

Wantage church, therefore, can boast of a continuous tradition going back over a thousand years to Lady Wynflaed about 950, but it may also be able to claim an even longer history of twelve hundred years, back to the earliest times of the conversion of Berkshire.

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4. F Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1971), pp 508-512
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8. S Piggott, *A Saxon cross shaft fragment from Wantage*, Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club 7(3), (1934), pp 149-50
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Wantage Parish Church c. 1995

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