

Oxfordshire

BURFORD PRIORY

Owners, Occupiers and General History, by Nicholas Cooper

Sources: The principal sources for the history of the Priory are RH Gretton, *The Burford Records* (1920), 257-95; Walter H Godfrey, 'Burford Priory', *Oxoniensia*, 4 (1939), 71-88.

1. The Medieval Hospital

The Hospital of St John the Evangelist was probably founded by William, earl of Gloucester (d.1183), no doubt (as was the normal function of such hospitals) for the accommodation and relief of the old and poor. Its organisation followed the rule of St Augustine, under a Prior, though he is generally referred to as Master in surviving documents. It is not known how many brethren may have been supported, nor how many of the poor. Presentation to the mastership seems to have been in the hands of the lord of the manor for the time being, although by the fifteenth century it had been assumed by the Corporation of Burford.

Grants of firewood from Wychwood in the earlier thirteenth century suggest that the income then was small, but modest gifts of land and other property are recorded from the second half of the century, and surviving fabric of the medieval buildings indicates a rebuilding at that period. Further property was acquired later, including the manor of Fifield, and the fact that requests were occasionally made to present to the mastership indicates that the office was considered to be worth having. However, the revenues were never large. At the end of the Hospital's existence in 1537 its property was believed to be worth £11 a year, when it was sought by the dispossessed abbot of Rewley; it was leased in 1538 for £10 a year, and valued at £12 3s.10d. in 1544.

The Hospital was probably dissolved in 1538 or 1539. The master, Thomas Cade, who held the office jointly with the vicarage, was granted a pension of £3 6s.8d. Following its surrender to the Crown, in 1543 it was sold to the barber-surgeon Edmund Harman for £109 19s. 2d., for his and his wife's lives.

2. Edmund and Agnes Harman (fl. 1543 to c.1576); Lawrence Tanfield c.1580-1625

Harman's interest in Burford predated his grant of the Priory, since he had married Agnes, one of the prominent local family of Silvester. He subsequently acquired other property in the town and its vicinity, but is likely to have lived at Taynton rather than at Burford (where he was lord of the manor from 1546). A monument in Burford church, put up by him in 1569, seven years before he died, was evidently a thank-offering rather than a memorial, judging from its inscription.

Following the end of Harman's lease – at an unknown date but probably by 1580 – the Priory was acquired by Lawrence Tanfield. Tanfield was the son of Robert Tanfield, who probably lived in the town. Called to the Bar in 1569, he was MP for New Woodstock in 1584 and for Oxford in 1604, and his legal career culminated in appointment as Chief Baron of the Exchequer in 1607. In 1603 he received James I at Burford on the king's first Progress, and was knighted shortly afterwards.

Tanfield was not popular in Burford, having acquired the lordship of the manor and recovered manorial rights that had been assumed by the Corporation. The prominence of his house would have been a constant reminder of him even when he was absent. Certain of the biblical inscriptions on his monument in the church (q.v.) can perhaps be read in this sense. These read: 'Peace shall be in the dwellings of the righteous'; 'Wisdom hath builded her house'; 'Such honour have all his saints and righteousness in all their palaces'; 'Riches and honour are in the hand of the Lord.' He died in 1625, leaving his Burford property to his grandson Lucius Cary, son of his only daughter Elizabeth, who had married the first Viscount Falkland. In 1637, Cary (who in 1633 succeeded as second Lord Falkland) sold the Priory to William Lenthall.

3. The Lenthall family, 1637-1828

William Lenthall (1591-1662), lawyer, was born in Henley, but his father had owned property in the neighbourhood of Burford and he was evidently living in the town in 1626. In 1630 he bought the Fettiplace estate of Bessels Leigh in Berkshire. He was elected to Parliament for Woodstock in 1640, and Speaker in the same year. Prominent in the administration under Cromwell, he was appointed Master of the Rolls in 1643, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1647, and from 1646 to 1648 was one of two Commissioners of the Great Seal. He remained Speaker until Cromwell's dissolution of Parliament in 1653, and was restored to the office in 1659, taking an active part in the affairs that led to Charles II's restoration in 1660. He died in 1662, leaving his property at Bessels Leigh and Burford to his son John.

John Lenthall may have spent little time at the Priory, which was let for periods in the 1670s and 1680s to the Duke of Ormonde: Ormonde was at Burford when Charles II visited the town in 1681 and attended the races. John Lenthall died in 1681, and his son William in 1686. William Lenthall's widow married the earl of Abercorn, and was living at Burford with her husband in 1695, on the occasion of a royal visit by William III. The earl and countess were still at the Priory in 1697, when John Pryor, a trustee for William Lenthall's sons, was found murdered in the grounds. It was rumoured that Pryor had been protecting his trust against some scheme of the earl's. Abercorn was arrested and tried at Oxford assizes, but acquitted.

William Lenthall's elder son John succeeded to the estates on coming of age, and lived till 1763. From him the Priory passed to his elder son William (died 1781), to his second son John (died 1783), and to John Lenthall's son, another John (died 1820). By the late eighteenth century the Lenthall family was in financial difficulties, and in 1808 the last John Lenthall greatly reduced the size of the house (see *Description*). William John Lenthall, his son, was the last of the family to live at Burford, and sold off the remaining family property in the town and the district, culminating with the Priory itself in 1828.

4. Later owners: nineteenth and twentieth centuries

The Priory and what remained of the Lenthalls' estate in the area were bought in 1828 by Charles Greenaway of Barrington Grove, whose interests were primarily in the land rather than in the house. Subsequent owners were:

1859-1908	heirs of Charles Greenaway
1908-12	Colonel JB de Sales la Terrière
1912-35	Emslie J Horniman
1935-41	Sir Archibald Southby
1941-present	The Priory of Our Lady, Burford

The Priory of our Lady was founded in 1941 from the Sisterhood of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage, and was recognised as a Benedictine community in 1952. Initially a women's community, it now (2006) admits members of both sexes.

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Read more in the EPE book *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* by Antonia Catchpole, David Clark and Robert Peberdy (published 2008)