



**A BRIEF HISTORY
OF
WARBLETON PRIORY
AND ITS
LAST PRIOR THOMAS HARMAR**

From the files of THE HARMER FAMILY ASSOCIATION
Photographs Ronald Harmer

The story of Thomas Harmar the last Prior of Warbleton Priory is one of the few occasions so far discovered when one of the Harmer family features albeit unwillingly in one of the historic events that we all learnt about in our history lessons – the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII.

THE FOUNDING OF THE PRIORY

Warbleton Priory was probably founded by Walter de Scotney during the reign of Richard I (1189 – 1199) as the Augustine Priory of Hastings. The establishing of Augustine Houses was popular among moderately well-to-do families as they were often based upon a large parish church that the family owned, or had purchased the patronage of, and in general they were of a modest size, many with less than ten canons or nuns. Indeed, of the two hundred Augustine priories founded only thirteen held the rank of abbey despite the second such priory being founded by Henry's I's Queen, Matilda, in 1107. The task of the canons was to instruct and inspire other Christians by the example of their godly living, under their vows, and to serve the spiritual needs of the world by prayer and praise to God, as did their original founder Saint Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD) – needless to say they were expected to say masses and pray for the souls of their benefactors as well.

Initially the Priory had the gift of the churches of Crowhurst and Ticehurst, with Dallington, Ashburnham and St Michael of Hastings soon to be added. However the income from these gifts was small amounting to £8.13s.4d in 1291 and despite expanding their lands in 1334 the sea which was already encroaching on their lands began to threaten the Priory itself.

THE MOVE TO WARBLETON

The only action the canons could take to improve their situation was to look for a second benefactor and in 1413 Sir John Pelham obtained a licence from Henry IV to grant the Hastings Priory Monks, new lands called "Tornorsland" in the Parish of Warbleton. This new land contained "sixty acres of good land and forty acres of heath" in order that they could "remove their church and all the house of their priory at Hastings which are destroyed and wasted by tempest and sea flood, that they can no longer dwell or celebrate divine service there, and rebuild them on the said place." Excavations carried out in 1972 by the Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group on the site at Cambridge Gardens in the heart of modern Hastings found no trace of "destruction and wasted by tempest and sea flood" at the time of the abandonment of the site in 1417. To help with removal and rebuilding expenses Henry IV also granted the new priory all the income from the manor of Mounkencourt in Withyham. The Priory was freed from paying tax to the crown for twenty years from 19th December 1413.

The new priory of Hastings which was built of ashlar sandstone was finally dedicated in 1417, to the Holy Trinity by Thomas Langley, Bishop of Durham. Despite the involvement of the Pelham family the priory was to remain generally poverty stricken throughout its short history at Warbleton, but where does our Thomas fit in?

THOMAS HARMAR ARRIVES

Bishop Sherburne visited the priory on the 18th September 1521 and this is when we meet our Thomas for the first time – there were three canons, John Mores, John Lyndsey and Thomas Harmar, two novices Richard Smyth and Thomas Hoth were being trained, Henry Swayne

was the Prior. In 1524, Bishop Sherburne visited the new priory a second time apparently nothing of particular interest was brought to his attention. Bishop Sherburne's third visitation was on 13 July 1527 and Thomas Harmer had moved into position of prior, with Thomas Hoth, Richard Smyth and Robert Jonys, his canons. Henry Fenell was then being trained as a novice. Thomas complained to the Bishop about Thomas Hoth, (Precentor) and one of his canons, was very often absent from the house without his permission. The two other canons confirmed this was true. The novice Henry Fenell was questioned by the Bishop concerning Hoth and said "All was well". Canon Robert Jonys complained to the Bishop that he was not treated with the same respect, by the prior, as the other canons. Also that the novice, Henry Fenell was a constant source of discord between the brethren.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PRIORY

The Dissolution, England's breach with Rome was brought to a head by the king's "great matter" his wish for a divorce and a male heir, when Henry VIII failed to obtain an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon from the Pope he determined to have the case decided by an English court. In 1533 parliament passed the central statute of Henry's Reformation The Act of Appeals beginning with the resounding claim that "This realm of England is an Empire". The act asserted the total independence of England from the Popes jurisdiction. In 1534, parliament started to strip the papacy of its other rights, papal taxes were allocated to the crown, the appointment of bishops was taken over by the King. By The Act of Supremacy the King was made "Supreme Head" of the Church of England. By this time Henry had divorced his first wife and married Anne Boleyn.

In May 1535, six royal officials toured the 850 monasteries of England and Wales, acting on a commission from the King, within months reports on each house had been submitted to the minister responsible. The reports were intended to discredit the monks by accusations of superstition and wickedness. Faced with these catalogues of corruption, parliament was persuaded to adopt a bill to suppress the smaller foundations "Forasmuch" ran the Statute, "as manifest sin, vicious, carnal, and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys." All those with an income below £200 a year were to be dissolved. Their lands and goods were forfeit to the king. The inhabitants told to return to secular life or else transfer to the larger houses. This task was completed by the busy and highly efficient Royal Commissioners in the early months of 1537. The new priory of Hastings in Warbleton was no more – our Thomas said his last mass and left the sanctuary for the last time



**FLOOR TILES FROM WARBLETON
PRIORY**

**THOMAS WOULD HAVE WALKED
ACROSS THESE**

The priory buildings reportedly to be “wholly in ruin” were promptly stripped of their lead, which was taken away in thirteen wagon loads. The entire contents:- ornaments, pictures, jewels, silver (128 ounces), bell metal (50 hundred weight) and other goods and chattels – were sold to diverse persons and the money paid into the Royal Treasury – every stone above ground of the priory church was then dismantled for use elsewhere.

The prior and canons were given their beds by the Kings Commissioners and sent on their way. Thomas went to Salehurst where he ended his days as clerk of Salehurst.



THE REMAINS OF THE NORTH WALL OF THE PRIORY CHURCH



THE REMAINS OF THE REFECTORY DOORWAY



HOUSE BUILT FROM WARBLETON PRIORY STONES

STILL AT THE SITE OF THE PRIORY

THE WILL OF THOMAS HARMAR

On the 16th of June 1543 Thomas Harmar Clerk of the Parish of Salehurst made his last will and testament.

In the name of God amen the 16th day of June 1543 I Thomas Harmar Clerke being in good mind and whole memory make my first and last will in form following. First I bequeath my soul unto almighty God to Our Lady St. Mary and to all the Company of Heaven and my body to be buried within the Parish Church of Salehuest – Item I will to have at my burial 10 priests and any one of them to have 8d a piece – Item At my anniversary I will to have 5 priests and any one of them to have 8d a piece – Item I bequeath to Jane Hacking and Dortathe her sister, either of them 20d a piece – Item I bequeath to any one of my god children being under the age of 14 years 4d apiece - Item I will that after the first year next after my burial 6s 8d to be paid for me by the space of 7 years – the residue of my goods I give and bequeath to William (Farmer) whom I make () over to suffice for my soul and all Christian souls – witness hereof (- Taylor) (William – Pooke) Thomas Hay.

Thomas survived for a further four years as the last payment of his pension of £6 per annum (from the time of the dissolution) was made during the first half of 1547. The date of his burial is not recorded but we can glimpse at the splendour of his burial at Salehurst through his wishes recorded in his will.

THOMAS HARMAR'S DEATHBED CONFESSION

We may not know exactly when Thomas died but we do have a record of some of his last words as John Cobb who was present records “Sir Thomas Harmer (Harmar) in his death bed did charge the said William Spysyer (Thomas's executor) to speak unto Sir Nicholas Pelham for the writings that he had of Harmer's land, which writings Sir William Pelham had of the said Thomas Harmer”. Also to Robert Tomkyn, Sir Thomas Harmer hath declared ”he had done his brother wrong, for that he had conveyed his copies away from him, and said further that if they were in his hands again, he would restore them to his said brother”. Why should Thomas do his brother John, such an ill favour? The same witness tells us “the said Sir Thomas Harmer told me that Sir William Pelham, knight, had promised him his aid and help at the next change to make him prior of the New Priory”.

It appears that Thomas purchased his promotion to prior by giving his brothers copyhold papers to William Pelham. It is assumed that when John Harmer purchased the tenancy to a house and 30 acres called Glidwish and a further 5 acres in Burwash manor, he gave his copy of the documents, the only proof he would have of his tenancy, to his brother cannon Harmar for safe keeping. Sometime later the Pelham's built an iron works near John's property and they eyed the adjacent land for future development. By obtaining John's copy documents from Thomas the Pelham's could throw John off the land whenever they wished. Having successfully bribed Thomas the Pelham's allowed John and then his son John and finally Johns' grandson Richard to occupy peacefully the land until circa 1559 when they tied to throw Richard off the land. Richard stood his ground and took the Pelham's to court. The case was eventually heard in London in 1562 but it was not until 21June 1564 the court ruled that the evidence was unclear and confusing, therefore it ordered John Pelham to admit Richard Harmer to part only of the claim, described as three closes called Glidwish (24 acres) and then gives the boundaries of this land. One way of course for the evidence to become clarified is to find copies or the original Manorial Court Rolls, that the missing copies were

of, these being obvious pieces of evidence, yet the court does not seem to have examined them. Fortunately, many of the Burwash Manor Court Rolls have survived, being in the Pelham collection in the British Museum Library. Those for the period 1500 - 1550 which have survived have been searched but there is no mention of Harmer's! Since the Manor Court rolls were at that time in the possession of the Pelham's they could have suppressed Harmer references, it certainly being in their interests to do so. It can only be assumed that it was the lack of written evidence that cast doubts in the mind of the arbitrators as to who was telling the truth in this matter.

The documents searched were:-

PRO REQ2/217/11 and REQ2/165/105

Ministers accounts PRO27 and 28 Henry VIII no 172

BL Add ch 29743 plus Burwash Manor Court Rolls
1500 - 1550

For further reading:-

Church and Dissent in Warbleton by Jeremy Goring
– Warbleton & District History Group

The Victoria History of Sussex Vol. 2 and 9

Sussex Archaeological Collections Vol. 13, 16, 92 and 95

Warbleton Priory by Stephen V Ziegler

The Sussex County Magazine Vol. 14

Hasting Augustinian Priory – Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group Paper No.2 –
1973