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Citation: Anna Hanna 'Aelfric Small and the foundation of Milford Church' *Milford-on-Sea Historical Record Society Occasional Magazine* NS3, (2009) 20-25

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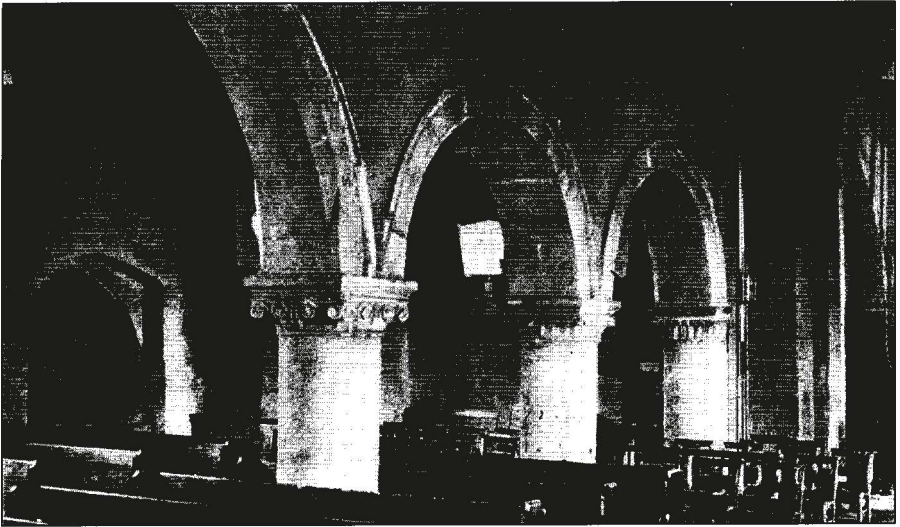
AELFRIC SMALL AND THE FOUNDATION OF MILFORD CHURCH

by Ann Hanna

Evidence of the foundation of a church at Milford in the eleventh century is to be found in the Christchurch Priory cartulary, the bulk of which was written in 1372. A cartulary is generally thought of as a copy of a collection of charters dealing with the transfer of land or property, and there are over nine hundred such charters copied into the Christchurch cartulary, including some forty dealing with land in and around Milford. But the Christchurch cartulary contains far more than copies of charters. There are letters, memoranda and legal documents, all of importance to the priory. Also there are copies of customals and rentals dealing with the tenants, their holdings, rents and obligations on various of the priory's manors, including Milford. There is the earliest known account of the bounds of the New Forest, and, included in a description of the bounds of the *parochia* of Christchurch, the area over which the Mother Church of Christchurch had spiritual responsibility, there is the following account of the foundation of Milford Church:

Alviet, who was present at the dedication of the church of Milford (Melneforda), testified that Aelfric Small had asked Dean Godric, and through him Bishop Walkelin, for permission to build a church there so long as nothing was lost to Christchurch, which from ancient custom received the tithes and churchscot. Moreover Aelfric gave the church a half virgate of land at the dedication, and at the same time the bishop and Aelfric handed over to Dean Godric and the canons of Christchurch the keys of the church and the land. So it was established in the presence of the bishop that only Aelfric's cottars and serfs were to be buried there, and they would give 4d. for burial. Godric was to send a priest there who would be maintained at Aelfric's table while in residence, and the priest ought to wait upon Aelfric at service as he would upon a magnate (maior), and accompany him to the hundred when summoned, but do nothing more. Alviet also saw that Godric sent there a priest called Eilwi from the church of Christchurch, and so Godric held that church while he lived, and afterwards his successors held it.¹

Unfortunately this record of the foundation of Milford Church, like many of the early documents in the cartulary, is undated. It was probably made some time after the event and this accounts for the use of the name Christchurch rather than the older name, Twynham, which would then have been in use. In 1086 Domesday Book states that Aelfric Small was given land at Milford in exchange for land which had been taken into the New Forest. It does not record a church at Milford, but not all churches that are known to have been in existence at that time are



The Norman arches in Milford Church
(Postcard courtesy J. Close-Brooks)



Norman doorways in Milford Church (one has an unusual trefoil head)
(Photos J. Close-Brooks)

recorded, and in the case of Milford there is reference to the “church then” being in the forest. This could be the land which Aelfric gave to his newly-built church at its dedication and handed over to Godric. If this is the case, then Aelfric’s church was built after the making of the New Forest and before Domesday was compiled. The forest is generally believed to have been instituted in 1079, but the actual date may have been earlier, as Richard, the second son of the Conqueror, is reported to have died of a hunting accident in the New Forest. The exact date of his death is not known, but he was witnessing royal charters between 1066 and 1069 and by 1074 his place had been taken by his younger brother, William Rufus. The likely date for the foundation of Milford church would therefore be sometime between about 1070 and 1086.

What is certain is that Aelfric wanted a church on his new estate at Milford. Having a church was not only convenient for the landowner and his tenants, but added to the owner’s dignity and standing. Aelfric had lost heavily by the making of the forest and doubtless he sought to restore his position in every way he could. Milford lay within the *parochia* of Christchurch, or Twynham as it was then called, which stretched from the Beaulieu River in the east to the pre-1979 boundary of Dorset in the west. Over all that area the Mother Church which stood on the site of the present Christchurch Priory was responsible for the spiritual care of the inhabitants and was entitled to receive the tithes and churchscot due from them. So it was that when Aelfric wanted to build a church at Milford he applied first to Godric, the leader of the canons at Twynham, and through him to Walkelin, who was bishop of Winchester from 1070 until his death in 1098. With permission given and the church built, the dedication took place, we are told, in the presence of both Godric and Bishop Walkelin. Aelfric handed over the keys of the church to Godric, together with the land he had presented to the church. The primacy of the Mother Church was thus demonstrated and its rights were set out. They precluded Milford from having a cemetery for all its inhabitants. Only the poorest of Aelfric’s people, the cottagers and serfs, would be buried there at a cost of 4d. each; otherwise bodies would be carried to Twynham and the Mother Church would receive the fees and offerings, as well as receiving the tithes and churchscot as before. The responsibility of the Mother Church lay in sending a priest to Milford to serve the church there. When in residence, the priest would be fed at Aelfric’s table. He would show due respect for Aelfric by waiting for him at service and would accompany him to the hundred court - again it was a sign of Aelfric’s standing that he had his priest with him - but the priest would do nothing further.

It is fortunate indeed that this account of the foundation of Milford Church was copied into the description of the bounds of the *parochia* of Twynham as given according to the testimony of Alviet, then dean of the Isle of Wight, and others. The reason may well lie in the fact that, as a young man, Alviet had accompanied

Godric to the dedication, and so it remained vividly in his memory. It is significant that in the first place Aelfric applied to Godric for permission to have a church at Milford. He must have done so while Godric was leader of the community at Twynham, before Godric's authority was superseded by that of Ranulf Flambard, who obtained the church and vill (township) from King William Rufus and was established as dean before 1093, but is not mentioned in the account of the foundation of Milford Church.

Aelfric's church may have been built of wood or stone. Somewhere around the middle of the 12th century, so getting on for a hundred years later, the church was rebuilt in stone. Three Norman arches in the nave and the two round-headed doorways in the transepts survive from this phase, but the rest of the church was altered again during the thirteenth century.

"Now comes the question: is any portion of the existing structure Aelfric's work? And much as it might be wished that the answer could be in the affirmative, the only reply possible at the present time is to the contrary". That is a quotation from the paper on "The Parish Church of All Saints, Milford-on Sea, Hants" by Mr. W. Ravenscroft in Volume 1, No. 4 of Milford Record Society's Occasional Magazine, published in August 1911. The position is the same today. Mr. Ravenscroft surmised that the reason for a rebuilding might be in part the arrival of the de Redvers family as overlords of much of the area and the establishment at Christchurch of a priory of Augustinian canons to replace the former community. Richard de Redvers' loyalty to Henry, the youngest of the Conqueror's sons, was rewarded when Henry obtained the throne of England in 1100. Richard was given lands in Devon, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, which became the three baronies of Plympton, Christchurch and Carisbrooke. The introduction of Augustinian canons at Christchurch took place in the time of Richard's son Baldwin in about 1150. The connection between Christchurch Priory and the church of Milford continued and the priory became a major landowner in the parish of Milford, establishing there one of its principal Hampshire manors.

But relations between the church of Milford and the priory were not always amicable, and the cause of dispute lay with the division of tithes between the vicar of Milford and the priory. The priory always claimed the right to the greater tithes, that is to say the tithes of sheaves of all types of grain. So determined were the canons to retain this right that when in 1236 they made the customary request for papal protection for the priory and all its possessions, Pope Gregory IX included confirmation of the priory's right to tithes of sheaves pertaining to the church of Milford and the chapel of Hordle. This right was said to have been granted by the bishop of Winchester with papal consent. But that was far from being the end of the matter. In 1290 Pope Nicholas IV ordered the prior of St Swithun's, Winchester, to hold an enquiry into the unlawful alienation of property belonging to the priory. A long legal case ensued in which first John Snow, vicar of Milford,

and then his successor, Roger de Hortun, endeavoured to win their church's claim to the tithes of sheaves. John succeeded for a time, but the priory appealed, and finally Roger de Hortun had to accept the judgement that the tithes lawfully belonged to the priory, and a heavy penalty of £200 was set for any failure to comply. Even this did not bring a final agreement, because there is in the cartulary a record of a settlement made in 1322 between the priory and the then vicar, Richard, which spelt out the church of Milford's entitlement in the way of tithes: namely the tithes of all mills and of hay throughout the parish, tithes of salterns as already received by the vicar, and the tithes of gardens, but the tithes of sheaves were specifically reserved for the priory. With this agreement the vicar expressed himself satisfied.

When, early in the thirteenth century, permission was sought by Henry de Ponte Audomari for the establishment of a private chapel at his house in Pennington in the parish of Milford, it was the interests of the church of Milford which were specifically protected by the agreement between Henry on the one part and Christchurch Priory and Robert vicar of Milford on the other. A suitable chaplain would be provided and Henry would be responsible for his maintenance. The right of Milford church to offerings and bequests would be upheld and Henry and his household would attend service there on five annual festivals, bringing on the feast of Assumption a candle weighing 1lb. On the feast of St Mary Magdalene the offerings would be shared between the chaplain and the vicar, who would conduct divine service in the chapel on that day.

Part of the interest of these records in the Christchurch cartulary lies in the names of early vicars of Milford. Another was Reginald, who appears before 1228 as a witness to a gift of land at Milford which was subsequently passed to Christchurch Priory.

The evidence of the cartulary suggests that Milford in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was a developing and flourishing parish, containing a manor which was a valuable part of Christchurch Priory's Hampshire estates, and the church which today shows visible signs of its expansion to meet the needs of its parishioners.

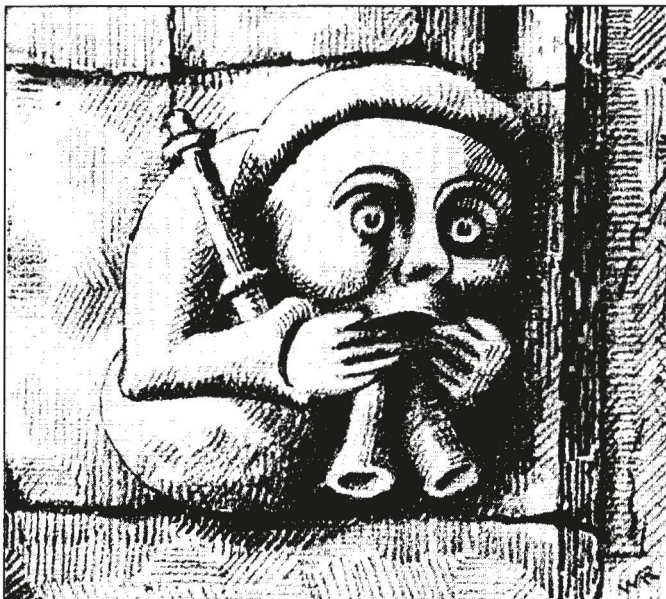
FOOTNOTE

1. Taken from **Hanna 2007**, pp 316-7. We thank Hampshire Record Office for permission to use the above extract.

SOURCES

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All Saints' Church, Milford-on-Sea, carving on south window
Drawing by William Ravenscroft