

THE FOUNDATION OF ROBERTSBRIDGE VILLAGE – Dorothy Martin

Summary

The newly founded Abbey of Pons Roberti was moved c1210 to a new site, a chapel being left where the original monastery had stood. The village of Robertsbridge, populated by Abbey tenants (possibly from the Abbey Tenement of Drigsell) sprang up around the chapel between 1210 and 1225. The granting of a market in the latter year probably marks the date from which the village can be regarded as soundly founded.

In 1176 Robert de St. Martin granted certain lands in Salehurst parish to the Cistercian monks for the purpose of founding an abbey. The site was situated on the north-west slope of a ridge, along the top of which ran what was probably a major track giving north south access across the floodplain of the river Limenel (Rother). To the north and west of the site the floodplains of the Limenel and Glottenham stream formed a natural boundary.

It was colonised in 1176 by monks from the Cistercian abbey of Boxley in Kent and was given the name Ponte Roberti. By a later grant, Aufred de St. Martin grants to the Abbey the fee of Waliland. This apparently included Elham and Ierchnesselle (Yorkshill) which Aufred held of the Canons of the Collegiate Church of St. Mary in the Castle, Hastings. For this land the monks were required to pay Hastings 6 shillings yearly for services. Around the year 1195 the Abbey made an agreement with St. Mary's, Hastings by which the Canons released all claim for Elhams in return for 35 acres of land called Ivingsfield in the fee of Waliland. As Elhams consisted of a mere twenty two and a half acres, it is evident that to exchange it for thirty five acres, the site must have been of considerable importance to the Convent. The value of the site, which consists of a raised platform in the Rother valley about a mile to the east of Robertsbridge soon becomes apparent, for between 1200 – 1220 the Convent moved from their original site to a new Abbey built on the lands of Elham. The exact date of the move is not known. A charter of Hugh de Lunsford grants to the monks one acre of land for the dedication of their church. Hugh is thought to have died c1214 and as the Convent would not have moved until their church had been dedicated, this would give a date for the move around 1210.

In the Papal Bull of 1219 however the land of Elham and the site of the Abbey are mentioned separately, suggesting that the abbey had not moved by this date. This however might be an error caused by transcribing from ancient deeds made before the Abbey moves. The charter of Hugh de Lunsford probably gives the more accurate dating and this is further strengthened by the fact that in January 1225 the Abbot was granted an annual fair and weekly market, suggesting that by this date the village was a fair size. As the Cistercian rule necessitated that an Abbey was built away from the community, this must have sprung up after the Abbey was moved. Five years seems hardly long enough for a village to become established.

It is known that when the Abbey moved they left a chapel on the original spot, this is evident from a charter of 1314 which refers to 'the chapel in the said village (Robertsbridge) on the spot where the Abbey was originally founded' this chapel was situated where the George Hotel now stands.

It is worth mentioning that in c1210 Richard de Drichnesell sold the lands and Tenant of Drichnesell (Drigsell) to the Abbey. Drigsell was situated at the present day Salehurst Fruit Farm, comparatively close to, and in full view of, the Abbey. No further reference is found to Drigsell or its tenants and by the survey of 1567 the lands are part of the Abbey's demesne and are renamed Parkhouse. This change of name had apparently occurred as early as 1325.

In the Domesday Survey of 1086 the Manor of Drigsell had tenants. These facts raise the theory that Drigsell could have been regarded by the monks as being close to their new Abbey. Consequently it was likely that it was depopulated, the tenants being re-housed in the newly founded village of Robertsbridge.

The grant of an annual fair and market in January 1225 was repealed a month later. Although this must have seemed a considerable set back to the community the village survived and developed into a small township which eventually superseded the Etchingham's Town of Salehurst which had partly caused the repeal.

Footnote

The bridge of Robert – probably named after a bridge built across the Limenel or Glottenham by the Founder Robert de St. Martin – but not across the Limenel at the point where the A21 now crosses the Rotheris as is usually thought. This track across what is a wide section of the flood plain would have been formed after the foundation of the village of Robertsbridge to connect it with the hamlet of Northbridge in the Manor of Etchingham. At this date Robertsbridge and Northbridge had not developed.