

Brief History – The Priory of Woodspring(Worspring)



About 4 miles north of Weston-super-Mare are the remains of the Priory of Worspring, a name which since Collinson's time has been wrongly changed to Woodspring.

(The name Woodspring was adopted after the dissolution of the monastic community).

This Priory was of the double Order of St Augustine and St Victor, and was dedicated to the honour of the Holy Trinity, St Mary the Virgin and St Thomas the Martyr of Canterbury.

The House was founded in or about 1210 by William de Courteney, a grandson of Reginald FitzUrse of Williton one of the Knights who murdered Archbishop Becket.

Worspring Priory was founded by William de Courtenay for Augustinian canons of the Order of St. Victor de Paris.

Note: they were also associated with the Victorine Abbey of Bristol.

No foundation charter exists, information comes from the confirmation of the endowment by Edward II in 1325, and a copy of a letter of William de Courteney to Jocelin, Bishop of Bath, which records the founder's object.



The thirteenth Century Priory Seal Shows the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket beneath the tower of Canterbury. The inscription reads: (SI) GILL. SANCTI. THOME. DE. (WORS)PRING

The Letter of William de Courteney to Bishop Jocelin is not dated, but as the Bishop is called the Bishop of Bath, it is clear that it was written after 1219 and before 1242.

He says that he had and he still has a mind a desire to found a convent at Worspring in his domain, where he had built a chapel in honour of the blessed Martyr St Thomas.

The Convent was to be for Canons of the Order of St Augustine of Bristol, and he purposed to endow the Priory with land at Worspring and with a Church at Worle (known as St Martins these days).

The Priory has had 11 Priors to 1536.

In 1243 during the appointment of Canon Richard of Keynsham as Prior of Worspring in succession to the late Prior Reginald, it is recorded that 26 Canons were present at the election.

Although it was never a wealthy Priory several times calling upon benefactors for assistance.

In 1277, John the Prior 'of the Order of St Victor', had two such benefactors the late William de Wethamstade Provost of Coombe and Alexander de Bamfield Canon of Wells, they provided 100 marks from their estates to the Priory of which 53s 4d was towards a Chaplain in the Cathedral Church of Wells, to celebrate for the souls of the Canons, and to perform a similar service in their own house on the morrow of St Vincent, and to provide pittances of 4s to be divided among themselves and the poor.

The Priory was visited by many Bishops over the years and in August 1333 the Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury spent sometime there.

The House seems to have been uniformly well kept and was largely a peaceful place without much disturbance until its dissolution during the time of Henry VIII.

The Murder of Becket



The Murder of Archbishop Becket in Dec 1170 by 4 Knights, William de Tracy, Reginald FitzUrse, Richard le Breton and Hugh de Morville, who was an accessory but 'struck no blow'.

Reginald FitzUrse was reputedly the first Knight to strike at Thomas (but not the killing blow), was full of remorse and gave up half his Manor at Williton to the Knights Templar as a way of raising money to travel to Rome and the Holy Land to do penance.

In the Bristol Channel is the Isle of Flat Holm which can be seen from the Priory. There was 'three forgotten mounds which mark the rude graves none knows of whom', but according to tradition are the graves of three of the Knights which slew Thomas a Becket!



Henry II, like the four Knights also had to do penance, as his inability to travel as a pilgrim to Palestine in order to obtain absolution for his part in Thomas's death was commuted to the foundation of religious houses.



Henry II.

What became of De Courteney's Grandfather Reginald FitzUrse!

The four knights initially escaped to Scotland and thence to Knaresborough castle. All four were excommunicated by the Pope on Easter Day and ordered to make a penitential pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It is believed that none returned!

However Legends hold that FitzUrse fled to Ireland where he fathered the McMahon clan.

The name Priory of Woodspring was suggested for the new Chapel by the No. 1 Founder Sir William of Braintree, from his local historical knowledge and his many previous visits to Woodspring Priory.

He also suggested the Chapel's motto '*fides dei indulgentia*' Which means 'faith in God's forgiveness'.

Written by Sir Andrew of Milton 25th October 2011.
Using publications from Sir William, local books and the internet.