

Alvingham Priory and Welton le Wold - a Keyhole into History

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So many local history books give tiny pieces of information about a certain event or an episode of local interest and then move on. The reader thinks, 'That's nice' and also moves on, because they are not given enough information to be able to consider the significance of this in historical terms or what it meant to the people living at the time.

These become like keyholes into history, visions down a long tube into the distant past, when people spoke and thought quite differently from us. These keyholes sit in marooned isolation on the page, quite disconnected from other snippets of a community's local history. The consequence is that readers are left without any deep understanding of what was going on. Can we insert the right key and open the whole door?

Take for example a reference in the Victoria County History of Lincoln, vol. 2, pages 192-4. This is a reputable book, but in the entry for Alvingham priory one statement sits alone :-

"In 1428 the prior of Alvingham held a quarter of a knight's fee in Welton."

We either read it and move on, or, in seeking a proper understanding, we stop to ask a lot of questions.

'What was the priory of Alvingham, where was it and why did it have an obligation of a quarter of a knight's fee, whatever that was and who was to receive it?'

Alvingham Priory – a member of a Lincolnshire monastic order

Now, that is a surprise. Most of the medieval monastic orders, such as the Franciscans and Benedictines, were founded in Italy, or like the Cistercians, started in France. However, in the early 12th Century an order called the Gilbertines was founded in Lincolnshire for nuns by a local man called Gilbert of Sempringham. They were supported by lay-sisters who carried out the menial tasks, as well as a smaller number of lay-brothers and male canons led by a prior, who lived in their own buildings on the same site. Meetings between the two sexes were strictly controlled. Many of these priories were classed as 'double houses', but the day-to-day lives of both nuns and canons were quite separate.

The priory at Alvingham lay just 6 miles to the east of Welton, on the other side of Louth. It was founded between 1148 and 1154 during the period of civil war at the end of King Stephen's reign. In exchange for the initial funding and support, daily prayers were said on behalf of the founder, his family and his ancestors. The Gilbertine order was quite a humble one, so it did not cost the founder such a huge amount of money as would be required to establish any of the European religious houses. The order became very popular, especially with the lesser gentry in England.

More locally to Welton, another Gilbertine priory was established at Ormsby, sometimes called Nun Ormsby [less than 4 miles to the north of here]. The nearest one to the west was only 7 miles away at Sixhills. All three were founded about the same time. There is nothing like political and social upheaval to concentrate the mind on matters spiritual. A total of 11 Gilbertine priories were founded in Lincolnshire and a further 15 established across the rest of England.

To help them survive, religious houses relied on donations of land, houses, fisheries, woodlands, rentals from parish churches and sometimes even the people who were tied to these particular lands. Most grants were given 'in pure and perpetual alms', which meant

the recipient was exempt from any linked feudal services and obligations, but sometimes these acres came with a requirement to pay the associated 'knight's fee'.

A Knight's Fee

Whenever the king wanted to wage war he needed knights, but there was no regular army. Instead, these men were requested from the king's feudal tenants-in-chief and they in turn called on their knighted tenants. The 'knight's fee' was the equivalent of the money required to fully equip a knight for military service for up to 40 days. This could amount to a great deal of money, especially as this had to include the cost of his armour, his squire, a war horse and any appropriate baggage.

A knight's fee soon became a rental that was paid whenever the king went on campaign. The payer of the fee was not obliged to go to war himself, though many did. Fragments of these fees, like the quarter mentioned for the prior of Alvingham, were paid according to how much land was involved in the tenancy and its quality. These fragments were paid to the lord who had granted the use of his land and he in turn was responsible for paying them to the king's treasurer.

So the priory of Alvingham had been granted the use of some land in Welton in return for paying this quarter of a knight's fee when required. It benefits us now to look at the original reference quoted in the footnote given in the Victoria County History. Here we can find the full text in the historical document called 'The Feudal Aids', also sometimes referred to as 'The Lay Subsidy Rolls', and delve a little deeper into this interesting situation.¹ The date of the assessment was the 9th July, in year 6 of Henry VI, 1428.

De priore de Alvyngham pro quarta parte un. f. m. in Welton, quam predecessores sui quondam tennerunt. Nichil, quia decimabile [*cancelled*]. Superonerantur de v. s.

Translation: *From the prior of Alvingham for a quarter part of one knight's fee in Welton, which his predecessors formerly held. Nothing, because of the grant of 10% [of the priory's income from this land offered by the Clergy] [cancelled]. Imposition of 5 shillings.*

Throughout the fifteenth century, the Crown was desperately short of revenue and in 1428 during the Hundred Years War taxes on knights' fees and other freeholds were tried in an attempt to raise money. The clergy claimed the right of 'self-taxation' and were prepared to grant 10% of their income or 'decimabile'. Interestingly this promise to the tenth in the entry above was later crossed out, as were all the other references to it in entries to similar fees owed by other religious houses. Clearly, someone was ordered to return to these rolls after they had been completed and edit them imposing a fixed figure on these monastical landholders instead.

When this alteration was done is not clear, but it must have been before 1445, when Henry VI granted all the double Gilbertine houses in Lincolnshire, including the priory of Alvingham, full freedom from all feudal aids, subsidies to the Crown and tallages (land taxes).² This release by the king may have been out of piety towards this English Order, but it may also have been a necessary political move. The clergy owed their primary allegiance to the Pope rather than their monarch. For the Crown to impose its own fee instead of accepting the offer that had been made by the Church was a potentially dangerous action. It was a direct challenge to the Pope's authority and the king could have been punished with excommunication. Henry was later diffusing the tension.

We can see from reading other entries in the Feudal Aids that the tax on lands valued at a knight's fee was 6/8d or half a mark. A portion of a fee was taxed in proportion. So the prior

of Alvingham owed a quarter part of a knight's fee in Alvingham, for which he was obliged to pay 20d [$\frac{1}{4}$ of 6/8d or 80d] and likewise he was being charged 20d for his quarter fee in Yarborough. This all makes sense, but why then was he being asked to pay 5 shillings [$\frac{3}{4}$ of 80d] for his quarter fee in Welton? Here is a conundrum. The king was making extra demands on the prior. Did Welton have a particular status or a higher than average value? Was the prior breeding highly profitable sheep here and therefore considered wealthy enough to pay more? I have not been able to find an answer to these questions. To refer back to my initial metaphor, this particular door to understanding remains firmly shut for the time being.

Is there anything else that we can determine from this snippet of information? Pleasingly, there is. Our entry in the Feudal Aids lies under the heading 'Foeda Honoris Richemondie' which means 'in the fee of the Honour of Richmond'. This was an ancient honour first granted to Count Alan of Brittany around 1071 by his second cousin, William the Conqueror, after the defeat of rebellions led by the northern Earls. At Domesday in 1086, he also happened to hold the manor in Welton. [See this website, *The Managers of the Manor, Welton le Wold, 1086 – 1218*] In 1428 the Honour was held by the third son of Henry IV, John of Lancaster, the Duke of Bedford. This means that the prior of Alvingham was a tenant of royalty for this land and he would have paid his fee directly to the Duke's bailiff.

It would appear that this was the only land in Welton le Wold that was farmed by Alvingham priory, but there were other religious houses active within the parish. They will be explored through further keyholes in another article.

References

- 1 *Inquisitions and Assessments relating to Feudal Aids preserved in the Public Record Office, AD 1284-1431*, H.C. Maxwell Lyte, vol. III, 1904, p.275
- 2 *Sempringham and Saint Gilbert and the Gilbertines*, E. Iredale, 1992, p.27.