

St Andrew's Chesterton and Sant'Andrea Vercelli : a never-ending story

Greetings from St Andrew's, Chesterton. It is a real delight to be with you and to renew links between us that have lasted for 800 years, since the time King Henry III gave the living of Chesterton to Cardinal Guala Bicchieri in gratitude for restoring peace to the kingdom.

I come to you bearing a book, *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War*, which was produced to accompany a recent exhibition in the British Library. I was taken to it by my wife, who was recently elected to be the University of Cambridge's Professor of Anglo-Saxon. So I think I had a reliable guide. She quoted a friend who said that the exhibition was like an extraordinary cocktail party where every time you turned round and talked to someone else you find yourself in the company of a best or long-lost friend. All the jewels of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts were there, brought together for the first time.

Amongst those jewels was the Codex Amiatinus, the earliest complete Latin Bible, which now lives in Firenze at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. It was produced in about 700 AD in the monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria. It is vast, about half a metre high and 18cm thick, weighing 34 kg. It required the skins of 2,000 cattle to provide the vellum. Sad to say, of course, that it could only be open on one page. The abbot Ceolfrith took it with him on his pilgrimage to Rome intending it as a gift for the Pope, but he died en route and neither he nor the book arrived. The exhibition was the first time the codex had returned to England – after a gap of about 1,300 years.

Another of the jewels on display had also originated from England and this was also its first time back home – I am speaking of course of what we call the Vercelli Book, one of the four most significant manuscripts to have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period in England. Housed in your Biblioteca Capitolare it used to be thought that it had been brought here by Cardinal Guala when he returned from England to build the new Abbey dedicated to St Andrew. But a scribble in the margins by what is thought to be an 11th century Italian hand means that the manuscript must have arrived here two hundred years before Guala. Lots of suggested bearers of the book have been put forward, but the best guess is that some pilgrim or other left or donated the book at the Santa Brigida degli Scoti hostel. It then passed into obscurity as the strange language and style was long forgotten.

The first poem in the book however is certainly a link between Vercelli and Chesterton. Andreas is an old English retelling of the legends about the saint, that tell of his being called to make an epic journey across the Black Sea in order to convert the blood-curdling (and man-eating) Mermedonians and to rescue his fellow apostle, St Matthew.

A recent study of the poem has suggested that its geographical details of Mermedonia are based on a landscape much closer to home to Anglo-Saxon England – the fenland of East Anglia. Like the Netherlands, until the drainage engineers reclaimed the land a vast area north of Cambridge was wetland, much of it under water with only small areas of where the ground was higher being fully habitable. These were like islands: we still talk of the Isle of Ely where our cathedral is. The cathedral was originally a monastery, a great abbey, first founded by the female saint Etheldreda in the seventh century. The islands of the fens were occupied by a series of major abbeys whose vocation was to live apart from the rest of society – Crowland, Peterborough, Thorney and Ramsey. These were regarded as holy sanctuaries amidst a hostile, threatening and dangerous landscape, often thought to be still populated by the Britons who had otherwise been driven out by the Anglo-Saxon tribes and who were often associated with cannibalism – and therefore a model for the man-eating Mermedonians.

If that theory is right then it is highly possible that Andreas was originally written in one of the scriptoria of those fenland abbeys – or even in Cambridge itself. Cambridge should be considered

because of the importance of St Andrew to whom the original church in Cambridge – or should I say Chesterton with Cambridge – was dedicated. Let me explain.

Before the English parish system became established towards the end of the first millennium churches were regional centres run by a community of clergy – either monastic as in Ely or a minster church as in Cambridge. We have no physical remains of Cambridge's Saxon minster but we do have remains of its churchyard, its burial ground, on the site where the castle was. Over the past three centuries successive archaeological discoveries on the site have produced grave markers dating from Anglo-Saxon times until the 12th or 13th centuries. The latest of these were moved to Chesterton churchyard two hundred years ago. Why to our churchyard? Because the castle remained in the parish of Chesterton until the 1870s (when what was then called New Chesterton – and a new church - was built between the castle and the old village). The castle, which belonged to the king, remained in royal hands when the rest of Cambridge became a self-governing borough (perhaps as long ago as the 8th century). Chesterton means the farm or property of the Chester, in Latin 'Caestre', in modern English 'Castle', and in Italian 'Castello'. The castle had been strategically important when Cambridge and its river was the border between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms – the Mercians to the west and the East Anglians to the east. It became important again when the Normans invaded England in 1066 and became the ruling class in the country. William the Conqueror built or rebuilt castles in strategic towns all over the kingdom in order to consolidate his authority. He reshaped Cambridge's castle mound and built fortifications around where the original minster church had been. His sheriff Hugh Picot built a new church in about 1092 and installed a new college of six priests (who were to become Augustinian canons). It is possible that he reused part of the old minster church in doing so: an arch in the current church of St Giles on that site includes what looks like a Saxon arch with carvings on it that are the shape of the saltire, the cross of St Andrew.

St Andrew is the most popular dedication of churches around Cambridge. As well as Chesterton there are two churches dedicated to Andrew in the city and of the 16 parishes that surround the city, eight are dedicated to St Andrew.

I have suggested that Andrew might have been popular because of the Andreas story that may have been first written and told in the region of Cambridge. It was also the case that when Gregory the Great sent Augustine to re-evangelise England in 597 he had previously been the prior of Gregory's monastery in Rome that was dedicated to St Andrew. But the popularity of Andrew in the Cambridge area was a consequence of the fact that the mother church (which stood on castle hill) was dedicated to St Andrew – and that church was the original parish church of Chesterton as well as being the mother church of Cambridge. We don't know when it disappeared: it could have been destroyed by the Vikings when they ruled that area in the 8th and 9th centuries, or the Normans when they built their castle in the 11th century. Or it could have still been there and remained the parish church until the thirteenth century. We don't know.

What I can say with some certainty is that there is no evidence of there being a church on the site of the current one in Chesterton before the middle of the 13th century – that is, several decades after your St Andrew's Abbey was built. So the idea I have read on several websites that the architecture of your abbey imitates that of my parish church can't be true because it just wasn't there....

So how did it come about that your abbey was endowed with the revenues of my parish? Let me piece together the story.

The original fields of Chesterton lie in a bend of the river. A parishioner of mine who teaches geography in the university tells me that the land would have been rich, regularly boosted by silting from the river and by flooding. The manor belonged to the king and his land was farmed by villagers who in return were given their own smaller pieces of land to farm and to live by. The villagers were also responsible for maintaining and staffing the king's castle and for providing food for the king's

table when he was in residence. Some of the land at the east end of the parish was also kept as hunting ground for the sport of the king on his visits. A portion of the fields in the bend of the river was given to the church in the form of the parish priest who was the Rector or ruler of the parish. He was also entitled to a tithe, a tenth, of all the parish's produce – wheat, barley, fruit, fish, everything. The lord of the manor, in this case the king, normally appointed the parish priest to his living and, as I say, the living consisted of both some land (called glebe) and the tithes. Once a church had been built, and the cost of having a church was much reduced, a living was worth a great deal of money. Hence they were often used to endow monasteries and, later, colleges. A monastery would become the Rector and appoint a priest to run the parish, supported by a much smaller subsection of the glebe and tithes. This priest was called a vicar. I am the Vicar of Chesterton. Up until about 1215 the parish had Rectors. From 1218 it had vicars, for two hundred years appointed by the Abbot of Vercelli who had become the Rectors of St Andrew's Chesterton. But why Chesterton (apart from the fact that it was a comparatively wealthy living)?

Let's take a step back and look at what was going on in the country and in the immediate area. In England the King was the man you know as Giovanni Senzatterra; to me he is simply King John. History hasn't rated him much as a king and neither has legend. Do you know the tales of Robin Hood? He is a folk hero who lived in Sherwood Forest when good King Richard was away on the crusades; in his absence John ruled and his officers such as the Sheriff of Nottingham were viewed as villains. Robin Hood was a nobleman turned outlaw hero who stole from the greedy rich to give to the oppressed poor. When Richard returned there was a great sigh of relief but he died five years later and John assumed the crown. There then followed one of the most turbulent reigns of British history with King John ranged against his barons who in 1215 waged war with the king in alliance with Prince Louis of France after the failure of the first attempt at establishing the Magna Carta. One of the barons who signed and then went on to fight against John was Saher de Quincy, Earl of Winchester. He held part of the manor of Chesterton, gifted to his family by Richard the Lionheart. In 1216 Cambridge Castle was taken by Louis and Saher de Quincy was made sheriff. Chesterton was under the control of the king's enemies. It was during this period that Cardinal Guala entered the scene, presided at the signing of the Magna Carta, ensured that Prince Louis withdrew, peace established with the barons and, when John died in 1217, that his infant heir was crowned as king and wise heads governed in his stead. Cambridge and Chesterton were restored to the king who appointed one of his senior men, Falkes de Breau, as sheriff, and a cleric of Guala's, Laurence, as Rector. We have record of the king writing to the sheriff instructing him to ensure that Laurence is properly paid by his tenants in the village. This is only weeks after control had been returned to the king and so perhaps this represents local tensions caused by the civil war. Later that year the living was awarded to the Cardinal for the building of his new Abbey at Vercelli – a task which began on Guala's return to his home town in 1219, 800 years ago. In turn Guala appointed a vicar to serve the parish, Adam of Wisbech.

But let's roll back a bit and see what has been happening to the village of Chesterton. In 1086 William the Conqueror ordered a survey of the whole of England in order to have a record of who owned or farmed all of the land – and, of course, to be clear about who should be paying what taxes. Chesterton is included as a village belonging directly to the king. It has land, it says, for 16 ploughs – that is, there was enough land in a year to keep busy 16 teams of 8 oxen and a plough. Of these 16, the villagers held 4 ploughs and they farmed 3 on behalf of the king. That left land for 9 ploughs that was uncultivated. There was clearly room for development in Chesterton and that's where Barnwell Priory comes in. Barnwell Priory was the successor to the foundation dedicated to St Giles that was set up by Sheriff Hugh Picot in 1092. You will remember that he founded a new community of six priests in a church built outside the castle walls. A generation later Picot's successor as patron, Pain Peverel, refounded the priory. He was a crusader knight, the standard bearer for the king's son. He was thirty years old. He said that it was thirty years since his baptism and thirty years until he would go to Heaven so he decided to expand the community to thirty canons who would pray for him, one

for each year he had left (and for each sin-filled year he had already completed). But the site near the castle was small and did not have an adequate water-supply, so he begged the king to grant him a part of the Cambridge common land that lay outside the town and along the river. There within memory a hermit called Godson had lived and had built a wooden church dedicated to St Andrew, of course, that was now unused and the place was uninhabited. Here there was plenty of space, a water supply (the Barnwell springs) and some monastic separation from the noisy town. So the community was refounded and prospered, being the major religious house of Cambridge until the time of the Reformation.

But in order to prosper the Augustinian canons had to attract endowments and to farm land that would bring in an income. They received gifts of land in the surrounding fields of Cambridge but all of that land also had to support the up-and-coming town and borough. Across the river however there was potential. There was our village of Chesterton whose purpose had been to support the royal castle but whose royal lands we have already seen were not being used to their full potential. In the year 1200 King John granted the manor of Chesterton to the Priory of Barnwell in return for an annual rent. That gave him an assured income and it gave the priory the chance to make the most of the unused land – which they did. For 350 years they managed the land and the village; they built a manor house where their steward would oversee their operations and hold court, resolving local disputes and being the Hall of the village where villagers would come together to eat and be entertained, perhaps listening to minstrels and hearing story-tellers relating tales such as Andreas while the mead flowed and the feasts were consumed. Part of that manor house still exists: it is next door to the church and also next door to St Andrew's Hall which is where the local community can gather today for its celebrations, entertainments and festivals.

St Andrew's Hall is comparatively young – only 15 years old, built on a site adjacent to the church and old manor house, that became available because of building development. It was offered to the local community. The church was the only local organisation with the stability and infrastructure able to take on the ownership of the site but from the beginning we agreed to manage the Hall by a committee that was half church people and half people from other community groups. I chair that committee and greatly value having a facility that is greatly used both by the church and by a large number of community groups and individuals – we have a large Hall and four smaller meeting rooms and they are used for Pilates and Yoga, for counselling, for caring for children who have been excluded from school, for an occasional café run by homeless people being trained for future employment, for church ministry training and for a church-run group for toddlers and their parents & carers. We run our Hall on almost the same site that the priory ran theirs 800 years ago.

So we have a manor built where the villagers lived a mile down the road from the castle. We have new landlords in the form of the priory built during the 13th century on the land the other side of the river. And we have a new way of appointing priests of the parish in the form of the Canons of Vercelli, that other Augustinian house. During the 13th century there seems to have been a bit of settling down in these new arrangements and perhaps attempts by Barnwell Priory to cut their Vercelli brethren out of the deal, but by about 1255 things had settled. The lords of the manor had built the first nave of the parish church in Chesterton in its new location. It was dedicated, of course, to St Andrew. A small part of that fabric still exists, not least the font where children and adults are still baptised 760 years later. The Rectors, the canons of Vercelli, built the chancel and also a homestead for their resident canon – they seem always to have sent one of their number to live in Chesterton and administer their living. They built a barn where they collected their tithes and they held court for their tenant farmers. There seems to have been a gap in appointing vicars to be the parish priest but in about 1250 they appointed a man called Stephen Rampton to be what they called their first vicar. They carved out a portion of their land to the north of the church for a vicarage to be built and they allocated a portion of their tithes and their land in order to give him a living. That site remained the site of the priest's house until the old vicarage was sold in 1990 and a modern house down the lane bought in its place.

We have a record of all that was apportioned to the vicar at that time and in perpetuity. It included:

- 18 acres of arable land
- All the income from church fees and collections at major festivals
- Mortuary fees; the priest was entitled to receive when the head of a household died a principal or best animal from that household – that could be a horse, an ox or a cow with calf, but not, it says a pig ‘unless the vicar chooses it’.
- The four candles that were placed around the coffin at funerals.
- The tithe of the hay, the mills, the woods, sheep, wool, pigs, geese, ducks, pigeons, chickens, fruit, wax, honey and cottage gardens – including, the record is keen to say ‘a tenth part of the leeks on Ash Wednesday’.
- 1000 eels a year from the river by the mill

There was a careful protocol about who had precedence amongst the clergy. There would have been a whole team of clergy saying masses and ministering within the parish. But who would be the boss: the Rector in the form of the canon from Vercelli (your man) or the vicar (who he had appointed)? It says, ‘Also we [that is, the Bishop of Ely] will and ordain that all the priests and clergy celebrating in the said church are obedient to both our proctor and our vicar’ but it is the vicar ‘who has the authority and governance of the church because of the English language’. I’m very sorry but we English never seem to want to be governed by those from Europe. The Bishop goes on to urge the clergy ‘that they do not make quarrels between them [that is the proctor and the vicar] and the parishioners, nor act against their will, under penalty of law, and that they make reverence to them, first to our proctor called Rector, and secondly to our vicar, and give them canonical obedience’. In other words, the proctor or Rector is a bit like the Queen – reverence must first be made to him - and the Vicar is like the Prime Minister, who holds all the levers of government.

For some two hundred years the abbey at Vercelli sent one of its number to reside on the Rectory farmstead, to protect their interests and collect their dues. In the mid 14th century the proctor built a new home for himself and the central part of it still exists to this day – it is known now as Chesterton Tower (but has in its day been called the Abbey, the Stone House and the Grange). It is the second oldest domestic building in Cambridge.

It would nice to think that your Vercelli forbears enjoyed their stay in England and the Abbey prospered through its living there but the truth is that as early as 1290 the Abbey made efforts to try and trade in their Chesterton living for a more convenient source of income. A hundred years later, they were still trying – they had negotiated with a number of English religious houses to exchange their asset but to no avail. In 1390 the pope wrote to Cosmatius, the cardinal priest of Holy Cross in Jerusalem with a

‘mandate to separate from the Augustinian abbot Hugh and the convent of St. Andrew's, Vercelli, and to appropriate to another church or monastery a certain dependent member of theirs in the diocese of Ely, wherein is the parish church of St Andrew Chesterton. They have been accustomed to send thither a proctor with power to institute a priest or vicar to serve the church, and to transmit the remainder of the tithes, fruits, etc.; but on account of the distance and expense there results to them little and sometimes no utility at all; and they fear, moreover, through the malevolent and assiduous efforts of certain persons of those parts, the total loss of their rights. The present executor is chosen because, having very often visited, when in minor orders, the said member [as collector in England], he is fully informed in regard to the facts. Faculty is given to provide from the revenues of such other church or monastery an equal or greater annual rent to the said abbey of St. Andrew's.’

But where did all the money go? In 1431 the canons of Vercelli took legal action against their abbot, William. From the time he assumed the abbacy Chesterton had produced 240 scuta of gold per year – but in the time of his predecessor the income was 1,200 scuta per year. They understandably suspected foul play.

But in 1440 disaster struck. In an era where there were rival popes on offer, Vercelli Abbey chose the wrong one and was subject to excommunication. Back in England King Henry VI had recently founded a new college in the university, King's Hall, but he was a little short of funds to fully endow it so asked the pope whether the church revenues of Chesterton could be diverted much closer to home. The pope agreed. There followed a number of legal attempts to restore the living but I'm afraid you will find that the British are pretty keen on diverting funds destined for Europe to worthy causes closer to home. King's Hall kept the living, rented out the farm and farmstead to tenant farmers and appointed its own fellows as vicars. The one hiatus was during the Reformation when King's Hall was combined with Michaelhouse and refounded as the College of the Holy & Undivided Trinity. Trinity College remain the Rectors and Patrons of the parish to this day. They still own Chesterton Tower though have sold off the land around it; they let it out to small businesses or language schools. It ceased to be a farmhouse in about 1840 when following Inclosure the old strip field system was brought to an end and the Rectory farm became one large block of land to the north of the parish. It was farmed until the second world war when it was requisitioned by the US Army and used to prepare vehicles and tanks for D-Day, the 75th anniversary of which has just been commemorated this week. The land was contaminated and made unusable for agriculture and was left derelict. But in 1970 the idea was hatched of turning into a science park, a new centre for scientific research and innovation, often in collaboration with the university. This has been hugely successful, has helped Cambridge become a world centre for hi-tech business, IT, engineering and bio-medical research and development. Trinity is by far the richest of the Cambridge colleges, not least because of the contribution made by the old Rectory Farm of Chesterton. And that could have been all yours....

St Andrew's remains an active parish church. It is staffed by a vicar (me), a curate (that is, a priest in their first training post), a self-supporting priest, and, until recently, two retired priests. We also employ a youth worker, a Hal manager and an administrator whose office is in St Andrew's Hall. We have a Director of Music and choir that is able to sing wonderful music. We have a variety of styles of service, some that are intended to include all ages, some that have fine traditional church music and some that are more informal and use modern music.

I work with a church council in organising the affairs of the church and we seek to look outwards as well as inwards, supporting financially mission and charitable activities in Cambridge and around the world. We fund all the food for an orphanage in Peru; we welcome visitors from our linked dioceses in North Germany and in Rwanda. We are delighted to renew our friendship with you in Vercelli. We treasure our very special local history and how that is a part of our national and indeed European history. Cambridge is a very European city, I am glad to say. Our university and our hi-tech businesses value the partnerships they enjoy throughout Europe and internationally. We are always glad to welcome visitors from other shores and work in partnership across boundaries as we did 800 years ago. So I am very glad to be here and to bring the greetings of my parish, community and city to you, our old friends of Vercelli.