

THOMAS CROMWELL'S LEGACY

I'm so excited! Hilary Mantel's third and final novel about the life of Thomas Cromwell is out, and I can't wait to read it! Based on impeccable research, immersing herself in the records of the 1530s, she has really brought this important historical figure to life, as a man as well as a politician.

This set me thinking about the effect Thomas Cromwell's actions might have had on the people of Dorney. One of the most significant impacts for local residents would have been the closure of Burnham Abbey as part of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Following the Reformation which established Henry VIII as head of the Church of England, Cromwell was instrumental in encouraging the king to reform the monasteries, which had developed a reputation for corruption. Eventually this became a wholesale closure of nearly 1,000 religious houses and seizure of their property, all overseen by Thomas Cromwell.

The abbey in Burnham was founded in 1265. It stood where the present abbey stands, in the area within the bends of Huntercombe Lane South. This abbey was endowed with several estates, including part or all of the manors of Boveney, Cippenham, Burnham, Stoke, Beaconsfield, Holmer, Little Missenden and Bulstrode – incorporating a substantial portion of fertile Thames Valley farmland, as well as 160 acres of woods, a mill and fisheries. The abbey had the rights to hold the market and fair in Burnham and a fair in Beaconsfield, from which they earned revenue. At the time of its dissolution, the abbey's annual net income was estimated at over £51 – a not insignificant sum, but not wealthy in comparison with other monasteries. When Thomas Cromwell and his assistants closed the abbey down, they took all that land for the Crown, who could then lease it out or sell it. For the local people who worked on the land, this would have been a time of change, as an institution which had been in place for centuries was replaced by new employers and no doubt different ways of working.

Thanks to the Dorney Manor Court records, which you can read on the Dorney History Group website, we know that the farming operations of the abbey did not exist in isolation from the village. A complaint, undated but probably in the 1530s, from Richard Hill, then Lord of the Manor of Dorney, raised several grievances about the abbess and her predecessors which he claimed had occurred over the previous 20 years. These included not properly maintaining the stream from the abbey's mill at Haymill down through Lake End and into Dorney, such that it caused flooding in the meadows and pastures of Dorney. The abbey had the right to take a cut of hay from a meadow in Boveney but had exceeded this by subsequently overgrazing the land with their cattle, which they did not have the right to do. Moreover, when taking the hay, the abbey's carts trampled over and damaged the grass belonging to other local farmers. Added to this were allegations of cutting wood illegally and trespassing, around Burnham and in Dorney Wood. Richard Hill and his tenant farmers might therefore have been pleased to see the abbey closed, though he died the following year, and it was not long before the Manor Court found fault with the new lay occupiers of the abbey.



At the time of its dissolution in 1539, Burnham Abbey comprised Alice Baldwin, the abbess, and nine nuns of the Augustine order. There were also two priests, 21 farm workers and 14 women servants. Probably, some of the abbey's land was rented out and some of it farmed in house. The nuns of Burnham Abbey had a good reputation, and they cooperated with the authorities when they were ordered to surrender their property. As a result, the abbess and her nuns were granted small pensions. History does not tell us what became of the lay workers, but let's hope they found alternative employment. The abbey's valuables, including bells and lead, were worth nearly £46, and these too of course were seized for the king.

A hundred years' later, the main living quarters of the abbey were being used by a farmer to store produce and implements. The church had been demolished about 1570. Gradually, all the old buildings fell into disrepair. But the nuns came back; or at least, new ones did, and since 1916 Burnham Abbey has been home to the Sisters of the Precious Blood, a community of Anglican Augustinian nuns. The remnants of the old abbey buildings have been incorporated into the modern convent.

The original abbey had a garden where they grew medicinal herbs, and there was an infirmary. Monasteries like this played an important role in looking after sick people in the surrounding area, and this would have included Dorney. They also provided relief and assistance for the elderly and infirm and those who had fallen on hard times. The abbey would have offered hospitality to travellers, and probably education for girls. The loss of Burnham Abbey as a place of refuge and care must have been keenly felt. All over the country, the closure of monasteries caused serious social problems, and increases in begging, vagrancy and crime were noticeable. It was to take many years before a replacement system of support was introduced, starting in 1563, when parishes began to collect contributions from their wealthier inhabitants to help the poor, elderly and sick. Thomas Cromwell was therefore indirectly responsible for the introduction of local rates which continue today as council tax.

A key component of parish poor relief was the concept of settlement. This meant essentially that each parish supported its own residents, not those born elsewhere. It would have been difficult to implement this without another of Cromwell's reforms – the introduction of parish registers. In 1538, he ordered each parish to keep a register of all baptisms, marriages and burials. The earliest registers have not survived for many parishes, but Dorney is one of the lucky ones. So, we know that Richard the son of Robert Goldwyn was baptised in Dorney church on 20 September 1538, and that Johanna was the most popular name for brides marrying there in the 1540s. Although the administrative value of church registers was largely overtaken by the introduction of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths in 1837, they are still maintained today, and formal signing of the register in front of witnesses is an important feature of a church wedding ceremony.



Spoiler alert! For those who don't know, Thomas Cromwell was beheaded in 1540. Getting close to Henry VIII could be a risky business, as some of his wives found out. But Cromwell's legacy is still with us today.

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