

# St Peter's Abbey ABBOTSBURY

## The Manuscripts

Like any other monastery, Abbotsbury would have had a library of manuscripts, almost entirely of religious works, given the cost of producing hand-written material. At the time of the Dissolution, significant legal documents such as charters, leases and contracts, would have been carefully collected by the new owners, to ensure continuity of rights over land and people, but the religious books had little intrinsic value, and would have been given away (or sold) to Abbey friends and benefactors.

In this way, the Abbotsbury charters were handed over to the Strangways family and are still there in the archives, but the library has largely disappeared. These three manuscripts, however, survived, each of them having some claim to have come from the Abbey in Abbotsbury even if they were not actually produced by the Abbotsbury monks. Their history suggests just how difficult it might be to track down any other manuscripts from the Abbey library.

The problem is that, however valuable these manuscripts might have been to the monks and their libraries, they symbolised "the old religion" and were of little value to the reformers. It wasn't until much later that their artistic worth overtook their spiritual merit: the catalogue entry for one of these three has a guide price of £200,000-£250,000, alongside which somebody has scribbled "£1,200,000" ~ and that was quite a few years ago.

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## THE ABBOTSBURY BREVIARY

Now in the library of Lambeth Palace, this little (about A5 size) book, has knocked about a bit. Basically an illustrated missal and prayer book, it dates from about 1400 and its 300-plus pages also contain a calendar to mark important feasts (including the dedication of the Abbey and the deaths of Orc and Tola, its 11th century founders), a table for calculating the date of Easter.

It has its curiosities ~ ~

Almost all the decorated initials incorporate a Catherine Wheel ~ one might expect that, given the presence of St Catherine's Chapel, built only a few years before the possible date of this book; but the Abbey itself was dedicated to St Peter. Was this breviary intended for use specifically in the Chapel rather than the Abbey ?

It came to Lambeth from Rouen, where some of the relics of St Catherine were deposited by a monk from St Catherine's monastery in Sinai, but it apparently came there from Germany.



How (and when) did it set out on that sort of journey, across Europe and back, from Abbotsbury ?

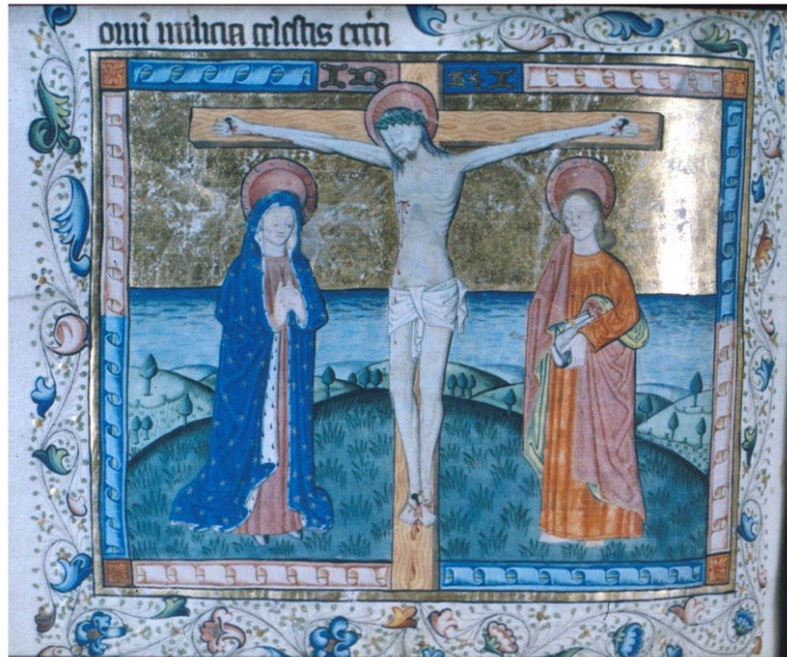
And there are some missing pages ~ nothing unusual there, except that among them are two widely separated pages, both containing services to commemorate St Thomas à Becket ? Nobody before the Reformation would do that, and why would a post-Reformation owner take that trouble ?

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## THE CLOSWORTH MISSAL

This is an English missal (Use of Sarum), dating from some time between 1475 and 1500, now in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University.

Made of parchment, it is described as containing "fine miniatures, border, initials. Good penwork, borders, initials (perhaps foreign ?)"



It contains the dedication of the parish of Closworth in Somerset, but the reason why it can be claimed as a possible remnant of the Abbotsbury is that the crucifixion scene pictured here is said to have been penned by a monk of Abbotsbury, and, according to one of the Earls of Ilchester, "the background of little hills, with a broad expanse of sea beyond, certainly reminded me of the view from the top of Wears Hill." The date is about right for the wealthiest period of Abbey life in Abbotsbury, and Closworth is only a few miles from the Melbury home of the Strangways family, owners of the Abbey estates since the Dissolution.

It belonged at one time to John Meade Falkner, author of "Moonfleet", and was presented to the Bodleian by Sir John Noble, bart.

More images from the Missal can be found on the Bodleian Library's website.

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# THE "ZACHARIAS CHRYSOPOLITANUS"

This one is also definitely from Abbotsbury ~ the back page has a Latin inscription saying so ~ but it didn't stay there for long: there is also a 15th century inscription saying that it belonged to Geoffrey Bevenew, a farmer from Elworth, just down the road from the Abbey. Perhaps it was part of the sale of assets carried out by the Abbot just before the Dissolution in order to minimise the King's profits from the Abbey closure.

The manuscript itself, slightly bigger than A4 and over an inch thick, is much older, dating back to 1170-1180, and may have been made at Winchester. The text is correctly called "In unum ex quatuor", and has been described as "a commentary on a commentary" of the four Gospels. A scholar called Tatian wrote a Greek book comparing the texts of the Gospels: Victor of Capua wrote a Latin book about Tatian's book, and Zacharias of Besancon wrote another Latin book about Victor's book about Tatian's book ...

Leaving Abbotsbury for Elworth in the 16th century, it passed to the Michel family of Dewlish, and was sold by them in 1925 to Sir Alfred Chester Beatty, who donated it to the Doheny Memorial Library in California, from where it was sold in 1987 to find its present home in the Wormsley Library collection built up by Sir Paul Getty.

Full details of the manuscript can be found in the British Library record of the 1987 sale, or in the illustrated catalogue produced by the Wormsley Library for an exhibition at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, in 1999.

