

ÆLFRIC AT EYNESHAM

When Ælfric came to Eynsham in 1005, he was getting on in age by contemporary standards, and only had about five years to live. His career had been at Cerne in Dorset, and it was essentially politics and patronage, especially his connections with the family of ealdorman Æthelmær, that brought him here to be first abbot of the re-founded monastery. So what did the greatest contemporary writer of English prose do for Oxfordshire in his brief career here?

He brought the learning and high ideas of the C10 monastic reform to a shire that so far did not contain a reformed monastery, although a greater one already existed at Abingdon, just across the Thames and county boundary. A man of such outstanding status and repute as a teacher and communicator must have had some impact.

He came at a time of great trouble and insecurity, when Viking raids in the region were accelerating towards what would be a ruinous climax ten years later. Restoring Christian society to a point where the heavy hand of God's judgment would be lifted had always been his preoccupation, and must have remained so when he came here. He continued to write, and indeed his concerns about moral failings and decadence were expressed with a new edge.

What he found here was an ancient and once enormously wealthy minster (it had owned much of west Oxfordshire in the 820s), now much reduced, and probably run by clergy not in monastic orders. This old 'unreformed' community may well have continued to exist here alongside Ælfric's new monastic one, even though we have no records of it. We know from the excavations that Ælfric rebuilt the core monastic buildings from scratch, in very solid masonry. It's also become clear recently that as part of the same operation, the whole area that is now the town centre of Eynsham was probably re-planned on the same formal grid-plan as the church and cloister, using an ancient Roman technology that had been re-introduced from the 950s as part of the new monastic culture. The streets around us, and this market square, are ultimately based on that grid-plan. So we can reasonably say that Ælfric wasn't just the most famous resident of Eynsham, but also its founder as an urban place.

As a moralist and reformer, Ælfric would have been concerned about the pastoral care and spiritual welfare of the local people. In 1005, the age of small churches at village and manorial level was only just beginning in west Oxfordshire, and formal pastoral care would largely have been provided by the minsters at Eynsham, Bampton, Charlbury, Shipton and Minster Lovell. We don't know anything about their priests, and

they need not necessarily have been ignorant, but it is unlikely that they were very closely connected with the mainstream of the court-centred reform movement.

We do happen to know that Ælfric interacted with the emerging class of local gentry who were interested in spiritual matters, and may have been starting to found their own estate churches, because of his correspondence with some of them. Especially interesting is his letter to one Sigeward 'æt Eostheolon'. This man lived at Asthall on the Windrush, about ten miles west of here on the edge of Wychwood Forest. His house was probably the predecessor of the one later occupied by Lord Redesdale and the Mitford sisters (what would Ælfric have made of them? The mind boggles!).

Sigeward was a devoted and perhaps slightly over-persistent follower of Ælfric, repeatedly asking for his teaching. As authors tend to do, Ælfric pointed out that Sigeward didn't need to listen to him endlessly because he could read his books: 'I have composed in English about forty homilies', he writes to him, 'in which you can read about this story with greater understanding than I can provide here'. Nonetheless, Ælfric did visit Sigeward in his house at Asthall, and there's an unexpected footnote to that. 'You pressed me to imbibe worldly drink to excess', he complains in his letter. Ælfric's own monastic rule forbade the abbot and monks to accept alcohol from lay hosts, but it sounds as though Sigeward not only received spiritual guidance from the great preacher and moralist, but also managed to get him at least slightly drunk. Should we picture Ælfric waking up at Eynsham with a hangover, and sitting down to write reproachfully to his host?

At any rate he was human enough to become quickly integrated into the Oxfordshire community. He counts as an Oxfordshire personality as well as one of the outstanding intellectuals of his age, and he amply deserves his blue plaque.

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