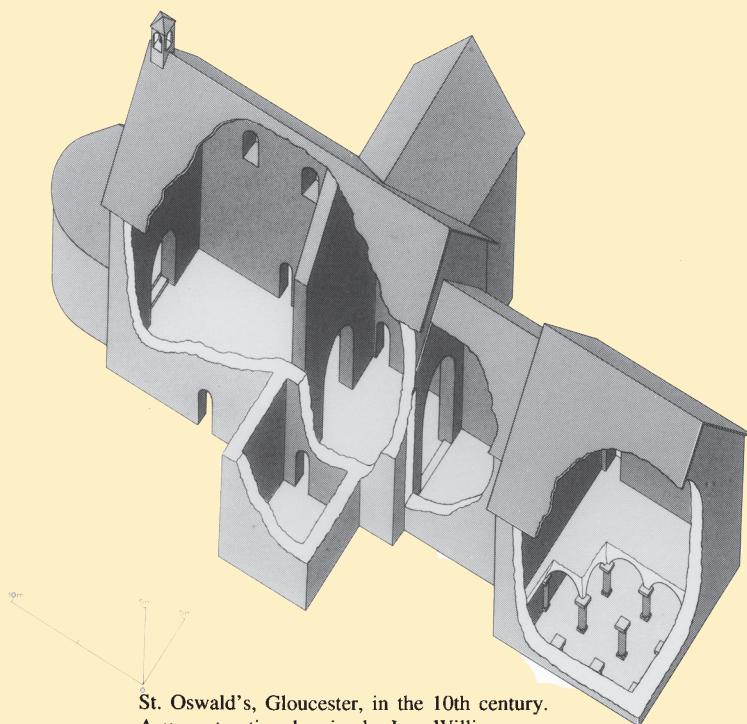


DEERHURST ST. MARY  
AND  
GLOUCESTER ST. OSWALD  
TWO ANGLO-SAXON MINSTERS

CAROLYN HEIGHWAY

Deerhurst Lecture 1989



St. Oswald's, Gloucester, in the 10th century.  
A reconstruction drawing by Jean Williamson.

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## DEERHURST ST. MARY AND GLOUCESTER ST. OSWALD: TWO ANGLO-SAXON MINSTERS

The two churches, Deerhurst St. Mary, and Gloucester St. Oswald, are complementary in several ways. Deerhurst is one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon churches, Gloucester St. Oswald was founded some 200 years later. Deerhurst survives with enough fabric to enable us to imagine its appearance in the tenth century; St. Oswald's was almost completely demolished in the seventeenth century, although excavation has greatly extended our understanding of it. Gloucester is 'urban', Deerhurst 'rural', though as we shall see this may be an anachronistic way of viewing their situation.

### DEERHURST

By the seventh century the Anglo-Saxons had established ruling dynasties in most parts of England; what is now Gloucestershire became part of the kingdom of the Hwicce. Though Christianity survived in the region, either continuously from Roman times or re-introduced from other areas of the British west, the princes of the Hwicce saw it as their duty to establish monasteries in their kingdom. Thus a great number of what we call 'old minsters' was founded. Most came into being in the late 600s. Deerhurst existed by 800, when the thegn Æthelmund was buried there; it is likely that Deerhurst had been created a century earlier, along with a number of other minsters.<sup>1</sup>

The minsters were many things: pious retreats for the penitent aristocracy, missionary centres, centres of learning and artistic patronage. Monasteries were founded for women as well as men: because of the necessity for pastoral work, a community of priests would be established alongside that of the nuns, and the whole ruled over by an abbess. Withington and Berkeley were 'double minsters' of this type.

Visitors to Deerhurst often ask why this great church was placed in such a remote spot. But this is to see the dichotomy of town and country in modern terms. The Anglo-Saxons (and their British subjects) had a different outlook. Though Roman towns, or their ruins,

were admired and indeed often had minsters in them, urbanism was not part of the Anglo-Saxon economic system. The nodal centres were rural: the royal vill. These were estates and administrative centres, one for each district or hundred, to which tribute was paid, and to which kings or sub-kings came from time to time to eat up their rents. Originally, there may have been one minster to each hundred; often the minsters were near the royal vill. The royal vills may sometimes have Roman antecedents; a number of minster churches are on Roman villa sites, representing the continuity not of the church (necessarily) but of the estate centre.<sup>2</sup>

Deerhurst was possibly the site of a royal vill. It was certainly an important place in the eleventh century, when Odda's chapel and probably a great hall were built. The brothers Ælfric and Odda, who built the complex, were kinsmen of the king and very much at the centre of national affairs. Though they created new buildings at Deerhurst, they probably did not create its administrative significance. We may ask why, at the time of the Danish invasion in 1016, the famous meeting between Edmund Ironside and Cnut, which agreed the partition of England, took place here. Deerhurst was not chosen because it was remote – statesmen then as now required some comfort. There are hints too of an earlier significance for Deerhurst. Stone walls excavated under the church appear to be of 'Dark Age' date. These might belong to some secular buildings, perhaps an early estate centre. Evidence of Roman buildings near Odda's chapel<sup>3</sup> may indicate that there was an estate centre in the Roman period also.

Thus Deerhurst in the eighth century would have a complex of hall and service buildings and a considerable number of servants and administrators; it was almost a small town. Apart from visits from nobles, it had its own estate to manage, and its inmates would probably be aristocrats and have relatives in high places. Its situation on a major waterway emphasised its importance as a centre of communications. In Anglo-Saxon terms, the monastery was anything but isolated.

The original church was a simple rectangular building with a western porch; it was surrounded by a ditch to demarcate the religious precinct.<sup>4</sup> The church was probably richly decorated with painting and sculpture, although no decoration of this period has survived.

As for life in the monasteries, we must dismiss from our minds

modern conceptions of the word 'monastery'. A strict distinction between monks and clergy did not yet exist. In some monasteries 'monks' lived more the life of secular canons. Some appear to have lived an entirely secular life, feasting or hunting just like their kinsmen in the great halls. Some monasteries were 'tax dodges' set up to obtain the freest of tenures, bookland, and as time went on, it became quite accepted for the priests of these churches to be married, and to have their own property which they conveyed by will to relatives, even children.<sup>5</sup>

We have no idea, of course, what sort of establishment there was at Deerhurst, but we need not imagine the ideal of extreme asceticism espoused by the Venerable Bede.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of King Alfred religious life was regarded as being in decay. A movement for reform, influenced by the Continental monasteries, began in the 960s under King Edgar. The canons were to be ousted, or to put away their wives and property, and true monastic rule installed. This was unpopular with many noblemen because it involved re-organising endowments; lands which had come to be regarded as family property were redistributed to the new establishments. Opposition from Ælfhere, earl of Mercia, who succeeded in secularising some of the monasteries, led him to be regarded in some traditions as a despoiler of the church. However, there is no good evidence that Deerhurst was reformed in the first place, let alone affected by Ælfhere's manoeuvrings.<sup>7</sup>

Deerhurst may have been reformed, at any rate for a short time. The historical evidence for reform is thin, yet the architecture of the church may suggest the influence of reformist ideas. By the tenth century the church had reached its most complex form, with a three-storeyed porch at the west end and a multiplicity of side chapels, platforms, and galleries. The reformers' 'handbook', the *Regularis Concordia*, prescribed elaborate ritual, including processions to multiple altars, and alternating choirs singing responses, probably from galleries and side chapels. We heard some of this music at the Deerhurst Lecture in 1988.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence for reform has been seen in the life of Archbishop Ælfheah, who may have begun his career at Deerhurst. He was abbot of Bath in the 970s, bishop of Winchester in 984, and archbishop of Canterbury by 1005. Ælfheah was certainly a monk in his later ca-

reer. He also became a saint, for he was taken hostage and murdered by the Danes at Greenwich in 1012, because he refused to be ransomed.<sup>9</sup>

In Edward the Confessor's time the estates of Deerhurst were alienated to Westminster. The Confessor's kinsmen, Odda and Ælfric, were powerful men who had close connections with Deerhurst; Odda died (at Deerhurst) in 1056 and was buried at Pershore. On Odda's death his estates passed to Edward the Confessor, and thence into the possession of Westminster Abbey, which continued to hold them in and after 1086.<sup>10</sup>

Odda's chapel was built in honour of Odda's brother Ælfric, who died at Deerhurst in 1053, and was also buried at Pershore. The inscription in the chapel implies that Odda's chapel was only one part of a complex of buildings including a royal hall.<sup>11</sup> These, as suggested above, were probably not the first of their kind to have stood on the spot.

#### ST OSWALD'S

Because the late ninth century was a low spot in the history of the church, and few churches were founded, there is a gap in our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon architecture. St. Oswald's, Gloucester, helps fill that gap: its foundation date is late ninth to early tenth century, and its architecture is reconstructable.<sup>12</sup>

St. Oswald's was founded by Æthelflæd of Mercia, daughter of Alfred, brother of King Edward of Wessex. Æthelflæd had restored Gloucester as a fortified centre and built a new church there; to this church she brought, in 909, the bones of St. Oswald, the famous Christian king of Northumbria, who had been killed by the heathen Penda of Mercia in 642.

The monastery at Gloucester was of the traditional secular type. It was later a Royal Free Chapel, and also maintained a chapel near the royal centre, by the eleventh century termed a palace, of Kingsholm. It was endowed with lands and a large parish on the outskirts of Gloucester.

Both churches probably made use of re-used Roman stone.<sup>13</sup> There is probably more local stone at Deerhurst, but the new church at Gloucester would seem to have made systematic use of a nearby Roman temple. The Gloucester church was about the same size as Deerhurst, with one north and one south side chapel.

The St. Oswald's plan is very traditional but for two things: the presence of a western apse, which links the building with contemporary Carolingian (but much bigger) churches on the continent, and the added eastern crypt, perhaps the mausoleum of Æthelflæd herself. Æthelflæd died in her traditional capital of Tamworth, but such was the importance of her foundation at Gloucester, that she was brought there to be buried.

In the tenth century, a tower was apparently added, then the western apse was demolished, and a clerestory window made into a door; this suggests a western gallery, by analogy with Deerhurst. Archaeological finds include a bell-pit of the early tenth century, and finds of bell metal and inscribed bell-mould.<sup>14</sup>

Both churches were extensively decorated with sculptured carving. Again, they are complementary. Whereas there is plenty of architectural sculpture at Deerhurst, but few funerary monuments, at St. Oswald's there were only a few fragments of decorated architecture, but a wealth of material in the shape of grave covers and cross shafts. This probably simply represents the different discovery



*Carved grave cover, early 10th century, from St Oswald's Gloucester*

circumstances of the two churches. St. Oswald's architecture has been carted away for re-use elsewhere, but the Deerhurst funerary monuments are buried in the churchyard or built into its walls. There was once far more carving of both sorts in both places.

The St. Oswald's sculpture includes ninth-century cross shafts, and tenth-century decorated grave covers.

The decorated sculpture of both churches was also painted. Some pieces at St. Oswald's show traces of paint; the beast-head on the north side of the chancel arch at Deerhurst shows its original paint.



The church walls were also decorated. At St. Oswald's, as at Deerhurst, there was a cross-wall in the nave. At St. Oswald's, this was embellished with painted plaster; a few fragments remain of what was once a huge picture, probably a crucifixion with angels above. This wall seems to have been intended as a rood screen, and the same was probably true of the similarly-placed wall at Deerhurst, which might well also have been painted.

Yet all this colour and decoration was less prized by the Anglo-Saxons than treasure. Any church, especially one like St. Oswald's which was extensively visited by pilgrims and received rich donation, was full of reliquaries, crosses, plate, and other gold and silver ornaments, of all kinds, as well as gold and silver embroidered hangings. Churches which survive today, such as Deerhurst, are bare and stark by Anglo-Saxon standards. St. Oswald's has produced two tiny gold objects, which are a reminder of the magnificence which once graced the interior of both churches.

Thus both churches, if we imagine a visit around the year 1000, were composed of small spaces, many altars, brightly painted carvings of animals, birds, pattern and foliage, dimly seen by candlelight, and all enhanced by the gleam of gold and silver.

#### END OF THE MINSTERS

St Oswald's had declined by the time of the Norman conquest: the church and its estates were appropriated by the Archbishop of York. Deerhurst's estates went to the two greatest royal monasteries of the Capetian and Norman kings, St. Denis, near Paris, and Westminster. Both churches had been taken over by the new power at the conquest. Both survived as parish churches, shorn of their former great possessions. Both became priories; Deerhurst became a cell of St. Denis, St. Oswald's an Augustinian priory. Both churches continued as parish churches after the Dissolution. However, St. Oswald's was patched up for only a hundred years, and was demolished by the City Council in 1653, so that only one wall remains. Deerhurst by contrast survives today; after more than a thousand years it is still a centre of Christian worship. Although the Venerable Bede would not approve of the services, even he would be pleased to see that a small part of the beauty that was valued so highly in its heyday has come down to us.



#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. S. Bassett, *The origins of the parishes of the Deerhurst area*, Deerhurst Lecture 1997; P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800* (1990), 174-5 and passim. For minsters in general see R K. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (1989), 93-139.
2. C. M. Heighway, *Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire* (1987), 122-9.
3. P. Rahtz and L. Watts, *St. Mary's Church, Deerhurst, Gloucestershire* (1997), 2.
4. Rahtz and Watts 1997, 207.
5. See P. Wormald, *How do we know so much about Anglo-Saxon Deerhurst?*, Deerhurst Lecture 1991.
6. For Bede's ideal and the monastic life in general, see P. Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy' in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, British Archaeological Reports 46 (1978), 32-95.
7. Wormald, *How do we know*, 8-9.
8. H. M. Taylor, 'Tenth century church building in England and on the Continent' in D. Parsons (ed.), *Tenth Century Studies* (1975), 141-168; T. Symons, 'Regularis Concordia: History and Derivation' in Parsons, *op. cit.* 48-56; Mary Berry, *Liturgical Music in Anglo Saxon Times*, Deerhurst Lecture 1988.
9. Wormald, *How do we know*, 7-9.
10. C. S. Taylor, 'Deerhurst, Pershore, and Westminster', *TBGAS* 25 (1902), 230-50.
11. The *aula regia* may have referred to the church alone: see David Parsons, 'Odda's Chapel, Deerhurst: place of worship or royal hall?', *Medieval Archaeology* 44 (2000), 225-8.
12. C. Heighway and R. Bryant, *The Golden Minster*, CBA Research Report 117 (1999).
13. Research on stone types is being carried out by Steve Bagshaw. There is more Roman stone re-used at Deerhurst than has hitherto been realised.

- 14 J. Bayley, R. Bryant and C. Heighway, 'A Tenth century Bell Pit and Bell Mould from St. Oswald's Priory Gloucester', *Medieval Archaeology* 37 (1993), 224-35.

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