

LIONEL GREEN teases out another aspect of the story of Merton Priory:

## CALWICH PRIORY, STAFFORDSHIRE

This was the last acquisition by Merton Priory. It was a small priory, together with the parish church of Ellastone, which had been founded in 1149 by Margaret de Bubenton and her husband Nicholas de Gresley (d.1166). Calwich was situated five miles south-west of Ashbourne and the monastery consisted of no more than four canons. It was given to Kenilworth Priory before 1169, but bought its independence in 1344.

The prior died in 1530, leaving a single canon who was transferred to another monastery. Suppression of the priory was effected by the Crown (illegally)<sup>1</sup> in October 1532. A survey had been made in 1530 giving a value of £117 4s 10d (£117.24), but it was not a profitable speculation, as the local landowner, Sir Ralph de Longford, was unable to pay the rent.

In 1536 Henry VIII wished to make a hunting chase for Hampton Court Palace, and looked across the River Thames to the manor of East Molesey. This had been in the possession of Merton Priory at or soon after its foundation<sup>2</sup>. The King suggested an exchange with Merton Priory for the distant and forlorn priory of Calwich, and it is not difficult to imagine long faces at Merton. A new lease was drawn up on 8 April 1537 for “the site, foundations, precinct and perambulation of the late Priory of Calwich and their manors and lands there and elsewhere, and the patronage of the church of Ellastone for £43 with the obligation on the lessee [Ralph Longford] to discharge a pension of 60s [£3] to the late [sic] priory of Kelyngworth”<sup>3</sup>. In the same year the King’s escheators sued Sir Ralph Longford for the rent of lands that he had already paid to Merton Priory. When finally in 1540 Thomas Cromwell acknowledged that the rent had been paid he insisted that this was only up to 1536, and new rents were now due to Merton until 1538, and then to the King<sup>4</sup>. This in spite of the fact that Merton Priory now belonged to the Crown. The matter continued for Sir Ralph until 1543, when Calwich was acquired by John Fleetwood.

### Subsequent History

The buildings at Calwich were not systematically destroyed following its dissolution, and Merton Priory had no part in their future. A contemporary historian<sup>5</sup> in 1593 reported that “a Lancashire man [Fleetwood] is owner thereof, who as I have heard, hath made a parlour of the chancel, a hall of the church and a kitchen of the steeple”.

The River Dove marks the boundary of Derbyshire and Staffordshire and flowed through the precincts. The priory buildings and fishponds were and are in the latter county. The road-bridge which crosses the river two miles to the north-east is today called Hanging Bridge and received its name from the judicial hanging of conspirators aiding the Young Pretender. In December 1745 Prince Charles Edward (1720-1788) marched south from Scotland and reached Derby. Sympathisers were arrested in the town, but the Prince managed to escape northwards.

In the 1740s Calwich was rebuilt by Bernard Granville (c.1699-1775), and George Frederick Handel often stayed at his invitation for summer leisure in the 1750s. Whilst at Calwich Handel is said to have supervised the building of an organ in the dining-room, and may have composed his Music for Royal Fireworks (1749) in a “temple” constructed between the priory’s fishponds, which still exists today<sup>6</sup>. Handel also presented Granville with a manuscript edition of his works in 38 volumes. When he died in 1759 he also left Granville two pictures.

Calwich was further enlarged in the 1790s, but entirely rebuilt around 1880. Today the house is a ruin.

1. The legality was effected in 1536 by adding a clause to the Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries. This covered any religious house “that otherwise had been suppressed or dissolved”.
2. O Manning and W Bray, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, 1804-14 I p246; T Allen, *A History of Surrey and Sussex*, 1829-30 II p24; W Dugdale *Monasticum Anglicanum* VI, 1846 p245
3. Letters & Papers Hen VIII 1538 pt 2 No 1219. This continued the payment made by Calwich to Kenilworth Abbey since 1344 in order to secure independence.
4. M T Fortescue, *History of Calwich Abbey*, 1914 p29
5. Sampson Erdeswicke (d.1603), *A Survey of Staffordshire*, ed. T Harwood, 1820 p362
6. However Pevsner in the Staffordshire volume in the *Buildings of England* series dates the ‘temple’ to 1790.



*The Temple, Calwich Abbey. From an old Water Colour*