

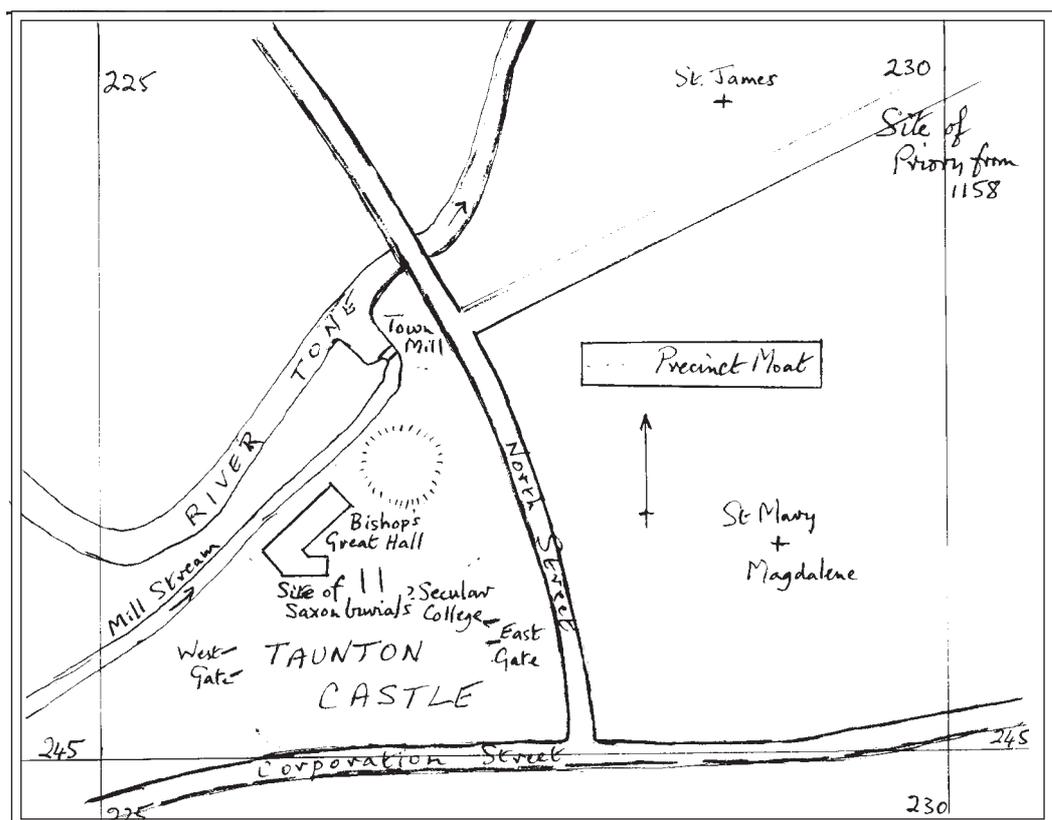
**LIONEL GREEN looks at a daughter house of Merton Priory:-
TAUNTON PRIORY**

In Saxon times there was a college of secular priests at Taunton ('secular' meaning non-monastic). The discovery, in the 1970s, of 9th-century Saxon burials suggests that the original foundation was in the Castle Green area of Taunton. In 904 several estates with chapels around Taunton passed to the bishop of Winchester. There is reference to the *monasterium*, suggesting a minster with dependent chapels. The dead of surrounding *vills* were brought, sometimes miles, to the college graveyard, and fees had to be paid to the secular priests. The priests were known as prebendaries, as they were supported by 'prebends', i.e. fixed income from church property. The Geld Inquest of 1084 shows that the priests held 2¼ hides (about 150 acres) of land. When William Giffard became bishop of Winchester in 1107 he fortified his residence at Taunton¹ so that the precinct moat enclosed the Great Hall² and the castle *motte*, as well as the college.

The bishop was familiar with the introduction of the Augustinian order into England, being personally involved with the foundation of Merton and Southwark monasteries near London. He wished the existing secular priests at Taunton to follow the new Rule, having observed how the canons of Merton were "sublimely aspiring to perfection" after only three years. He therefore requested some canons of Merton to "introduce into his church of Taunton those same observances which they themselves employed."³ Five brethren set off from Merton in 1120 "amongst whom was that Master Guy who with good reason was the most famous amongst us".⁴

The canons followed the Augustinian Rule at Taunton, and a few "who had been there, began to adopt the way of life according to the rule but certain [secular priests] had no wish to change their firmly rooted bad habits". Guy, an Italian schoolmaster, used his best efforts to try to change them, and was deeply upset over his failure. These were priests who did not want to take vows; for the vow of poverty meant giving up their 'prebends' and the vow of chastity their wives or housekeepers.

At Merton Guy had been zealous in religious duties and sincerely devout, but at Taunton he lived an even austere life, for no one could restrain his fervour. As prior, he gave to the poor all that he could, and would assign to the sick and needy the food set on his own table, and be content with bread and water, declaring to his taunters that "what is taken from one's own mouth is more pleasing to God. Let me not fatten my flesh for the worms and see a precious creature of God die before me with hunger". He would buy for the poor capes, tunics and shoes, but always provided whatever was necessary for the canons. Guy was able to do this as he had control over the income from former prebends. The bishop actively supported the new foundation with grants of manors, including Fons George, which contained the Syreford (Sherford) Brook "for grinding their corn and all advantage thence to be derived". The fishponds or *vivary* were within this parish.



It was no doubt Guy's influence that resulted in the foundation of St Margaret's leper hospital and chapel served by the priory. The people of Taunton appreciated Guy's work, and some believed he was a saint, for he frequently calmed storms.⁵

But within the priory there was dissent. The poor were never satisfied, and the rich were jealous over the gifts allotted to the poor. Complaints were made to the bishop that Guy did not show respect to the men of influence who could benefit the Church. He was now finding the administration of the priory irksome, and finally appealed to the Prior of Merton to recall him to the place he loved. His wish was granted and instead of grieving that he was no longer a prior he rejoiced "as if freed from a prison or like a bird released from a trap".⁵

Giffard's successor at Winchester was Henry of Blois, and, when the civil war in Stephen's reign began, the bishop strengthened the defences within his diocese.⁶ The importance of the castle at Taunton resulted in a relocation of the priory by Henry of Blois in 1158. This became the monastery of St Peter and St Paul, situated outside the East Gate. Sherford Brook was diverted to serve the new precinct and the mill.

The leper hospital building of c.1510 still exists (just). It continued as an almshouse until 1936, when it was condemned for human habitation, and is now empty and roofless.

1. J Collinson *History of ... Somerset* 1791 iii p231
2. A Pre-Conquest bank underlies the Great Hall which also might be part of the precinct boundary of the minster
3. College of Heralds: Arundel MS 28 fo.93v; M L Colker *Studia Monastica* Vol.12 (1970) p342
4. BL Royal MS 8 E ix; M L Colker 'The Life of Guy of Merton ...' in *Medieval Studies* Toronto Vol.xxxi (1969) p257
5. *ibid.* p259
6. A record of 1138 states that he built castles at Winchester, Farnham, Bishops Waltham, Merton and Dunton as well as Taunton, but many of these, including Taunton, were already in existence.

BILL SOLE has redrawn the map of STANE STREET IN GREATER LONDON

In the *Merton and Morden News* for 3 June 1960 there is a short article and photograph under the headline **Traces of Roman road found on Crown Site.**

It reports that contractors on the construction site of Crown House, the present Civic Centre, had unearthed a layer of chalk covered with flint. Neither material occurs as layers naturally in the district, and the assumption was that these finds were part of the Roman road Stane Street, which is known to have passed through Morden. Sections of it have been excavated in Stonecot Hill.

According to the report, Bernard Sunley, whose firm was the main contractor for the Crown House development, presented some of the flints to Miss Jowett, Librarian for Merton & Morden UDC and founder member of this Society. The photograph, which shows four men and a trench, unfortunately does not reproduce well.

No official record seems to have been made at the time, but, thanks to Bill Sole, the find is now registered with the Sites and Monuments Record. The exact location was in the backyard of the then Crown public house, at Grid Reference TQ 26500 68500, and Bill's new map takes it into account.

JG

