

## **Spatial Structures and their Construction in English Monastic Towns**

Anna Anisimova

The issue of 'space' has been quite important for urban historians for a while now, and 'International Commission for the History of Towns' (the organiser of this session) has played an important role in it, having a special 'Town Atlas Group'. There are several important considerations in the issue of 'space'. Spatial arrangement was one of the criteria proposed for the definition of medieval towns distinguishing them from villages (e.g., S. Reynolds, C.M. Heighway, M.R. Eddy), even though it was definitely not the most decisive one or more fundamental than others and turned out to be not that differentiating, as was demonstrated by further research (D. Palliser).

Two general trends can be distinguished in the current approach towards the 'space' in the research of English medieval towns. On the one hand, there is a tradition of a town-plan analysis that started with M.R.G. Conzen (1960s) whose ideas gave an important tool for investigation of medieval towns. His ideas were developed by historical geographers and now also used by historians. Recently, this trend was enriched and strengthened by the possibilities provided by GIS-technologies. Based on this approach, with close connection to the results of archaeological investigation, a nation-wide map-based survey and analysis of urban landscapes in England has been going on since 1992 that has resulted so far in 'the Extensive Urban Surveys' of more than 700 individual towns and creation of 'Urban Archaeological Database'.

On the other hand, there is a different approach towards understanding of 'urban space', expressed by Henri Lefebvre's idea of 'social production of space' (1974) that has been adopted and widely interpreted by historians since then. Undoubtedly, both this approaches made important contributions in our understanding of urban space.

'Monastic towns' (defined as 'a relatively small town under the lordship of a monastery') constituted a significant amount of English towns during the Middle Ages, making up about 1/6 of the total number of medieval towns in England. There were some 110 towns that were created by or just belonged to the monasteries. Being mostly 'small towns' in size and nature, monastic towns presented an interesting case of settlements on the thin border between urban and rural settlements.

Although this category of towns is determined on the political level (by the type of lordship), the special character of these towns' lords could have added peculiarity to different aspects of their life. Not all researchers agree that there is need to treat monastic towns as a special type of towns, but it is possible to identify

several aspects which make them different from those belonging to the king, another lay lord, or even a bishop. And the spatial arrangement of these towns is one of them. It can be distinctive in more ways than one, including not only physical but also social construction of space in a monastic town.

This paper will explore the phenomenon on the material of England with a special focus on the South-Eastern region which provides a variety of monastic towns (50 in number) with different characteristics and the level of development.

There were different ways for a religious house to become a town's lord: foundation/plantation, encouraging of a developing settlement, promotion of an existing settlement, acquisition of an already existing town. It is evident that the level of monastic involvement in shaping of a town could be different, depending on a town's origins, ranging from most active and involved in case of plantation to non-participation in case of acquisition. Nevertheless, in the latter case there is still possibility that the monastery intentionally or naturally rearranged the existing settlement. It is impossible to give preference to any of these types, as there are examples of all of them among the monastic towns without special dominance of anyone.

Taking in account the different orders of religious houses, it is possible to point out that the Benedictines were there most active, both in having lordship over towns and in deliberate creation of new ones (75 towns in England, 35 towns in the region); with the Augustinians going in the second (17 and 8 towns, respectively). After that there were also the Cistercians (11 and 4 towns), the Premonstratensians (2 and no towns), and the Templars (4 and 3 towns). The most peculiar is the fact of Cistercians' participation in urbanisation that was characterised not only by the acquisition of a town (Coggeshall) but also by deliberate laying out of one (Billericay), which definitely contradicted the restrictive legislation of this order.

The plantations attempted by the monasteries were not very numerous, and not always successful. However, there are examples of towns laid out next to monastic precinct (St Albans, Battle), next to already existing settlement (Newland Eynsham, Newland Witham), or just on the outlying estate (Brentwood, Epping, Billericay, Stevenage, Watford, Winslow). In the latter case, the layout of the settlements mostly depended on the local terrain features and did not differ from the other towns founded by other lords in similar circumstances.

In addition, a monastic precinct itself could become a focus of a settlement. Or, foundation of a monastery in town could lead to a change in town's focus or layout. It seems likely that monastic precinct was a natural focus of a settlement, as there are many examples of the towns that grew next to the precincts without known deliberate actions on the part of the monks. Even though the independence of this growth could have been only relative, as it is difficult to suppose that a town

could have grown next to the precinct without monks' agreement or contrary to it. However, in cases with no evidence of planning, it is usually considered to be an 'organic' development. These circumstances contribute to the idea of a precinct (religious house) as an import focus of urban growth/development that attracted people and goods to its gates.

The shape of a settlement depends on many factors, such as landscape, presence of roads and water courses, nature of the settlement's core/focal point, origins of the settlement, and its phases of development. At closer look, most towns have a composite plan, reflecting the stages of its development. The layout was not always static and could undergo a dramatic change with time. Above all, the towns continued to grow. But there were also other factors that could change the layout of an already existing settlement. Appearance of a monastic precinct could be one of them. There were several examples when the monastery was founded at the periphery of the settlement, but it gradually managed to become a new focal point for the town, with a new market place (deliberately created or spontaneously grown) next to the precinct. It happened so in Abingdon and Reading (both co. Berks.). And there are some reasons to believe that it could be the case in Eynsham (Oxon.), where the original settlement at Acre End moved towards the monastic gates. Thus, a monastery (and monastic precinct) could have been an important factor in the topographical development of a town. The appearance of a religious body was able to change the layout not only of an early insignificant settlement (Eynsham, Abingdon) but also of a developed one (Faversham, Reading).

It is logical to suppose that monastery's impact on urban space would be less influential in the towns that were situated on its outer lands, i.e. not near the monastic precinct. However, there is evidence of active town-planning in such instances as well. The exact operations of the monks concerning the laying-out of plots often remain unknown to us, as the main evidence is presented by the cartography – a regular character of urban plots on the early Ordinance Survey maps (Watford, Rye, Winchelsea, Whitchurch, Harlow?, Steyning, Thatcham, etc.). Most of these developments took form of a single street, built on both or quite often just on one side.

The origins of a monastic town and the level of religious house's involvement in it had a direct impact on the formation of urban space. The most influence was felt in the towns that had a monastic precinct in its landscape, although it was not a necessary element of the townscape of a monastic town. Only 18 towns (of 50 under consideration here) had a precinct within their boundaries. Its location was determined by several factors and mutual spatial arrangement of a monastery and a town (and its main elements) could be different. The monastic precinct could be a focal point of the town, with a market adjacent to its gates (e.g. St Albans), or it

could be situated at the opposite ends of the town from market place (Battle). Most often the precinct was located on the outskirts of the town, as if next to it, which could be, in a way, an expression of the perceived opposition between 'town' and 'monastery'. In Coggeshall it was even separated from the town by a small river, but this can be explained by its belonging to the Cistercian order.

Usually monastic precinct was not completely encircled with tenements, although it still could be near the centre of town (market square), especially if monastery was a nucleus of town origin. Thus, in Eynsham and Battle settlement was situated to the north of monastery, in Reading, Abingdon and Waltham Abbey – to the south, in Faversham – to the south-west, in Royston – to the west. In Dunstable, Malling and Westminster the precinct bordered with town on two sides. The most enclosed were the precincts of St. Albans and Romsey which were surrounded by tenements from three sides. Failure to completely encircle the monastery might be explained by several reasons: the large size of precinct (up to 30 acres in Reading), landscape features (river, slope, marsh, creek etc.), monastic economy (fishponds, mills, vineyards, etc. situated near the precinct).

It seems that monastic precinct did not try to isolate itself from the town, as there were tenements adjacent to the precinct wall in Reading, Battle, St Albans, Abingdon, and Eynsham. And it is known that, at least, in St Albans those tenements were laid out by the monks. Meanwhile, monastic precinct was physically separated from the town by a wall with gates. In most cases it was the only wall in the town, as the only defences in the towns were ditches. Crenellation of a precinct was characteristic for the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Royal licence to crenellate the whole of the precinct of Abingdon abbey was obtained in 1330. In 1338 Abbot of Battle was granted licence 'to fortify with a wall and of stone and lime, and krenellate the site of the Abbey'. And in St. Albans the Norman Abbey precinct was surrounded by a stone wall, which was, presumably, built in the late 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century. On the north, east and south sides of the precinct large parts of the stone wall, possibly all of it, were replaced in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by a clay bank. In 1357 Thomas de la Mare, Abbot of St. Albans, obtained a licence to rebuild the wall, in stone and with crenellations (between the west front of the Abbey church and the Great Gate). Idea to fortify the monastic precinct might have had different reasons, among them a desire to protect themselves from rebellious townsfolk (Abingdon), and French danger (Battle), etc.

The territory of the precinct was not necessarily permanent and could change over time, although it could equally remain unchanged as was the case in Reading, Dunstable, Faversham, Battle, Abingdon, and Romsey. At the same time, there were three phases of development of the abbey precinct in Eynsham, with two enlargements, in 1217 and 1280. The first enlargement was to the west of the

precinct and did not touch directly the town space, even though a local road was blocked. However, the second enlargement directly touched the town, as part of Acre End area was included in the precinct. It is also known that precinct of Westminster abbey was enlarged in 1388 at the expense of the lands to the east of Jewel Tower. Yet the precinct area could also diminish, as it happened in St Albans, where the precinct wall was moved from the street front to accommodate a row of tenements.

The monastic precinct was characterised not only by its physical difference from the rest of the town, but also by its special nature, being a consecrated land. And here comes another feature of spatial arrangement of a monastic town – the ‘social construction of space’, that could include the definition of the religious precinct and the sanctuary rights of the monastery; the way in which townspeople may have used those spaces, for example, for assemblies and trading; use of the abbey church for parochial purposes, those cases where the town had a separate parish church, sometimes pre-dating the monastic interest, and the conflict of rights (e.g. over burial) which sometimes ensued.

Initially, the right of sanctuary<sup>1</sup> belonged generally to all churches and was normally restricted to the church building. Later, the right included part of the territory around the church (i.e. churchyard, precinct) and sometimes even exceeded its limits. It was a temporary refuge for the period of 40 days after which fugitive had to be taken by local authorities or abjure the realm and quit it. These refuges could not provide guaranteed escape, and there were many abuses of sanctuaries by the sheriff and his men.

However, there was also the second type of sanctuary belonging to the precincts of several monasteries, such as (Beaulieu, Beverley, Hexham,) St. Albans and Westminster, among others, that provided a permanent or perpetual asylum. The right was originated by a royal grant or by the Pope’s bull. That asylum was unconditional and inviolable. ‘Aggressors were urged to keep their distance for the sake of holy relics deposited with each sanctuary’s keepers.’ Sometimes the territory of the immunity exceeded the boundaries of a precinct and was, then, marked by crosses.

In Westminster the territory of sanctuary was limited by the precinct itself. The date of the origin of this privilege is unknown. Charters appealed to the concession of King Edgar, and the oldest surviving documentation of the Westminster sanctuary dates back to the end of 11<sup>th</sup> century (1086 – 1104). The oath to be taken by those fleeing to the sanctuary of Westminster (early 13<sup>th</sup> c.) gives some ideas concerning the life in this asylum. According to it, a fugitive should honestly say the reason of his persecution and respect the rules of the refuge. It was forbidden to

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<sup>1</sup> Any fugitive from justice who could reach a sanctuary was protected from arrest.

sell the provided food, wear arms and leave the territory of refuge without permission of the monk-archdeacon of Westminster.

The sanctuary accumulated a large assembly of marginal types, destitute or criminal, or both. It is also important to note that some of them not only escaped justice but continued their activities, emerging periodically from the sanctuary. In 1487 fugitives had left their asylum at Westminster to pillage properties of the partisans of Henry VII. The mob then returned to sanctuary, which apparently harboured them as before. All these troubles caused a campaign against sanctuaries during the reign of King Henry VII. Although the sanctuaries were not destroyed, an attempt was made to enforce some limitations on them (prohibition to return, statute of negligent escapes, etc.). These measures were also approved by the Pope.

Thus, sanctuary right of the monastery attracted different people, and could be troublesome for maintaining order in town. Criminals, however, were not the only ones interested in monastic sanctuaries.

As it is well known, monasteries and churches attracted trading activities to their vicinity. This fact found its expression in the location of markets near monastic gates. Meanwhile, the territory of a monastic precinct could also be used for trading activities (fair, market). For example, in Westminster, the October Fair took place in the northern part of the precinct. The fair was granted by King Henry III in 1245. Despite the prohibition of holding markets at churchyards and the decision made in 1248 to remove it to Tothill, Westminster fair continued to take place at the abbey churchyard. As G. Rosser noted, 'To a trader desiring both complete immunity and convenient proximity to the city, nowhere offered greater safety than the sanctuary of Westminster Abbey.'

Later, this circumstance led to the appearance of permanent secular buildings in the precinct. A similar process was usually characteristic for market places. As in St Albans, where the precinct wall was moved to some distance back from the street frontage on the north side of the abbey<sup>2</sup>, in Westminster monks agreed on the presence of tenements in the precinct because of the profit in form of rent.

Since monastery was the lord of the town, administration of justice and sessions of manorial court often took place at the territory of monastic precinct. Thus, in St. Albans the hundred court was held under the ash tree within the monastic precinct until Dissolution. In Westminster the halimote was held in the churchyard to the north of the church (also within the precinct). Another important occasion for the government of the town, such as appointment or election of the main urban officer – mayor – also could take place in the abbey (Reading, Faversham).

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<sup>2</sup> This sacrifice of part of the precinct to the tenements was in response to encroachment across the wall, and recognized the cramped spaces the tenements occupied.

However, townspeople did not use this territory for their own meetings. For this purpose they could use town parish church (St Helen's in Abingdon) or a special municipal building, such as guildhall (Reading) or Clock tower (St Albans, 15<sup>th</sup> century).

Townspeople might have used not only a monastic precinct but also a monastic church. When monastery preceded town in appearance (St Albans, Westminster, Romsey) or they were established more or less simultaneously (Dunstable, Battle), monastic church could be used as a parish church for laity. The lack of the parish church in those cases when there were some dwellers before foundation of the monastery could be explained by the possibility that the existing church was used for the monastery, especially if it had high (minster) status (which could be the case of Eynsham). In Faversham, Reading and Abingdon there were parish churches which predated the appearance of monastic church, and, therefore, there was no need for townspeople to go to the latter, although parishioners of St. Laurence's church in Reading, possibly used abbey church as their parish church at the early times before the church was built.

As the town grew, there appeared necessity of more spacious building to accommodate all the parishioners, which could prompt (although not necessarily) the foundation (or enlargement) of parish church for townspeople, as it happened in Battle, Westminster, and, possibly, Eynsham. One more reason which could influence the decision of the monks to build a separate church of their townsfolk was that the latter disturbed the former by their noise during the service. According to 'The Chronicle of Battle Abbey', it was this that caused the building of the church of St Mary.

In Westminster townspeople used a separate church, situated on the monastic precinct, northwards of the abbey church. There was a 14<sup>th</sup> century tradition that a church on the present site, dedicated to St Margaret, had first been built by King Edward the Confessor. (There is positive evidence that a parish church existed in the reign of William the Conqueror.) And tradition also seems to imply that the parishioners of Westminster had previously been accustomed to receive the sacraments in the abbey church itself. A similar transition also possibly took place with the parishioners of St. Laurence's in Reading, which too was situated at the monastic precinct. In Eynsham the church of St. Leonard was located just near the monastic wall, and some historians even suppose that once it was a part of monastic precinct.

Some towns, such as Dunstable and Romsey, did not have a separate parish church for their inhabitants until Dissolution. At St. Albans townsfolk continued to use abbey church as their parish church, although there was also a separate parish

church, St Peter's, situated at the northern end of the town and dated back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The fact that parishioners frequented the same church as monks did not mean that they were attending the service together. Usually, one aisle was given to the townspeople and it was separated by a screen from monastic part of the church. The location of the parish aisle in the northern part of the abbey church was influenced by the structure of the monastery, for, normally, the main part of the monastic precinct was located southwards of the monastic church, which put the parish aisle to the northern part. Townspeople had their own entrance into the church. All these should separate them from the monks or nuns.

The sharing of the same church between laity and ecclesiastics might cause several problems. In Romsey the high altar was in the nuns' quire, and the vicar ministering to the lay people resented the palms being blessed out of sight of the congregation (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century). However, more frequent were other problems, that of responsibility for the reparations of the church (Romsey) as well as narrowness of the parish aisle for the growing urban population (Dunstable, Romsey). The solution was found in the rebuilding/enlargement of parish part of the church, and the obligation to maintain the new church was imposed on the townspeople, although monastic authorities needed some persuasion to agree to necessary changes. The urban aisle in St Albans also was rebuilt during the time of Abbot John Whethampstead (beginning of 15<sup>th</sup> century), although the rebuilding was made under the supervision of the abbot himself and there is no evidence about any tension between townspeople and monks concerning the matter.

It is logical that a lay cemetery was situated in the monastic precinct, when the parish church was also situated there (St Margaret's in Westminster, St Nicholas in Abingdon, St Laurence in Reading) or was a part of the monastic church (Dunstable, Romsey, St Andrew's in St. Albans), and there were no disputes between townspeople and monastic authorities concerning it. The lay cemetery would be situated near that part of the church which served as a town parish church, i.e. to the north of the monastic church. Secular cemetery was separated from that of monks. At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the lay cemetery on the monastic precinct in St Albans was closed, and the parish of St Andrew used for burial of its parishioners some territory at the cemetery of another parish church of the town, St Peter's, although some wealthy burgesses, by their wish, still could be buried in the monastery.

Whether separate town parish church had its own cemetery depended on several factors: first of all, its status, and also origin and location. St Mary's in Faversham, St Mary's (the most ancient in the town) and St Giles' (before 1191, graveyard by



1200) in Reading, St Peter's in St Albans, all these churches had their own cemeteries to bury their parishioners.

Some parish churches (St Mary's in Battle and St Leonard's in Eynsham), although they were separate buildings, basically, continued to be part of monastic church. They had a status of a chapel and their cemeteries were situated on the monastic precinct. Location of St Leonard's church – small space between market square and monastic precinct – also does not allow any space for cemetery.

All the mentioned examples of cemeteries situated in the monastic precinct did not provoke any tensions between burgesses and their lord – monastery.

More complex was the question concerning burial when an ancient church had lost its right of burial to monastic church, as it happened with St Helen's in Abingdon (7<sup>th</sup> c., minster church with dependent chapelries). At some point the leading position in Abingdon was translated from St Helen's to St Mary's, the abbey church. By 995 the church of St Helen became the parish church of Abingdon, although the burial rights remained with St Mary's.

A prolonged dispute about right of burial occurred between vicar and parishioners, on one side, and monastery, on the other, at the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century. This conflict reached such intensity that it involved the Pope, papal judges, bishop of Salisbury, archbishop of Canterbury, and the king. The latter became involved after it became known that the vicar of St Helen's, together with his parishioners, established their own cemetery, adjacent to their church and surrounded it by stone wall, thus, permanently turning several temporal tenements (about an acre) to spiritual use, i.e. violated the Statute of Mortmain. Eventually, the case was decided in monastery's favour. The bodies buried in the parish church or new cemetery (62 bodies) ought to have been exhumed and buried within the cemetery of the church on the monastic precinct. The rights of the monastery should have been restored and all due payments should have been paid by vicar to the monastery. There is no further evidence concerning the case, although it is known that the St. Helen's did not have burial rights at the time of the Dissolution.

Thus, we can see that monastic precinct was although a distinctive but an integral part of the town and it was connected with different activities of townspeople. Monasteries had a great impact on the territorial organisation of their towns, and this influence was not limited only to the planning initiatives of the religious houses.

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