

Evidence for a Twelfth-Century Community of Benefactors in a North Devon Charter

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Monastic cartularies are an excellent source of information for family history but the entries are often succinct and formulaic. Occasionally, however, a document contains enough interesting detail that it becomes worthy of research in its own right. One such document, relating to a donation of land to the newly founded Minchin Buckland Priory in the late twelfth century, emerged in research for material for a study of the Ruffus/Rous family in Devonshire. It provides a snapshot of the relationships between families in North Devon in the 1180s and highlights the participation of an unusually large group of women in the grant.

Minchin Buckland Priory at Durston in Somerset was founded by the Hospitallers Order of St John of Jerusalem in about 1186. It was intended to provide a Preceptory and also a priory for sisters of the order, of whom there were eight individuals scattered across the various Hospitaller priories in England. The resulting organisation included Buckland Preceptory with a Preceptor and brothers, and Minchin (or Nuns) Buckland Priory with its own Prioress and sisters – the only foundation for women founded by this Order.¹ The Priory's cartulary has survived and provides detailed information about gifts large and small.

Towards the end of the 1180s William Ketel and his family made a grant and confirmation of land in Lynton parish, Shirwell Hundred to Minchin Buckland Priory for the benefit of *the poor of the Hospital of Jerusalem and the brethren serving therein*.

Grant and confirmation by William Ketel with the assent and will of his wife Rameta, and of his heir, Henry, and of his other sons Roger, Ralph

and Richard, to the poor of the Hospital of Jerusalem and the brethren serving therein, of all the land which Ailmer held in Ilcriton, and a mesuage with the land which is between the house of Geoffrey Gurde and the wood called Birichhege: and six acres of meadow in Thethemedede, towards Fursille, that is towards Left [or Lest]: and all the wood (*nemus*) of Brichhege which is between Ilcriton and Hamton; and all the wood (*silva*) which is between the house of Sir William Ketel and the bridge of Suslaneie, which was the portion (*pars*) of Maud, sister of dame Rameta. And this grant is ratified by Mauger and his wife, Mahald, and Hugh Fresel and his wife, Godeva. And on account of this grant the said brethren of the Hospital of Jerusalem gave to Sir William and his son Henry, one ox, appraised at 5s.; and to dame Rameta a golden necklet [*monile*] appraised at 18d.; and to their three sons 12d.; and to Maud and her husband, Mauger, one ox appraised at 5s., and one cow with calf for 4s.; and to Godiva a white horse appraised at half a mark; and to her husband, Hugh Fresel, an ox [appraised] at 5s. and a cow at 4s. If perchance neither he nor his heirs are able to warrant this land according to the will of the brethren they shall make an exchange of land of equal value. Which alms he makes for the health of himself, his wife Rameta, his heirs, and his lord and his heirs, and for his ancestors, and he and his wife, Rameta, and Henry, his heir, grant the same in pure and perpetual alms free and quit from all other things which pertain to the King, or himself, or to the lord of the ground; that he may become a sharer of all the good things which are done in the Hospital of Jerusalem, or in other houses pertaining to the same Hospital.

Hiis Testibus: Maugero de Sancto Albino, Ricardo de Raleie, Stephano le Flemmyng, Radulpho Coffyn, Radulpho Ruffo, Waltero de Raleie, Radulpho decano et uxore eijus, domina Mahalda, Gilberto de Cova et uxore eijus, domina Rosilia, Hamlin de Boclem et uxore eijus, Ricardo filio Elie et uxore eijus, Dionisia, domina Juliana uxore Radulphi Ruffi, domina Emma uxore Bartholomei de Stokes, et multi aliis.²

The punctuation given in this list of witnesses was imposed by the editor who also indexed the female witnesses such as *domina Mahalda* under their first name, implying that they were not connected to the name of the man preceding theirs in the list. This would have created an extraordinary number of female witnesses. The Archivist at Somerset has kindly examined the original document and has reported that there is no punctuation anywhere in the charter. I have, therefore, taken the names of wives in this document to be

Ralph Dean and his wife dame Mahalda
 Gilbert de Cova and his wife dame Rosilia
 Hamlin de Boclem and his wife

Richard Fitz Elias [Coffin] and his wife Dionisia
Dame Juliana the wife of Ralph Ruffus
Dame Emma the wife of Bartholomew de Stokes

The land was a part of the manor of Ilkerton which included East and West Ilkerton, Great and Little Willanger, High and Low Bullen, Radsbury, Sparhanger and Thornworthy. It was also known as the manor of Woolhanger (Willanger) after one of the bigger constituent parts. As part of a much larger landholding it was held after 1066 by William Capra and then later as a part of the Honour of Bradninch, held by William Tracy and then the Earl of Cornwall.³ The grant was a valuable one, including a farm at Ilkerton, the meadow on the Furzehill side of Ilkerton and several areas of woodland, including woodland [*Brichhege*] which was located between Ilkerton and Caffins Heanton. The woodland which lay between Sir William's house and a local bridge had been owned by Maud, Rameta's sister. She and her husband Mauger ratified the grant, as did their sister Godeva and her husband Hugh Fresel. The value of the property can be seen in the items given by the Hospitallers in return.

The family involved in this grant has been difficult to trace. The Ketel men do not appear in any documents outside of the cartularies of Minchin Buckland and Forde. Godeva was married to Hugh Fresel and they, too, do not appear under any of the variant versions of the name except in the two cartularies. Maud's husband is probably the Mauger de Lyn who appears in Forde cartulary records with his brothers-in-law. He appears to have had descendants; Roger de Lyn remitted a large group of people living on the monks' land in Lynton to Forde in about 1220, and 'Mauger son of Mauger' appeared in a grant to Forde dated to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. An accompanying grant was witnessed by Mauger de Lyn.⁴ The identity of the family from which Rameta and her sisters came can not be established. It is, however, possible that they were members of the Coffin or Fauvell families, both of whom held land in the close vicinity. – Geoffrey Coffin held the manor of Woolhangar (less than a mile from Ilkerton) in 1185 and the Coffins held the neighbouring manor of Hamton (Caffins Heanton) at a later date, while the Fauvell's possibly held land in Radsbury in the manor of Ilkerton.⁵

The document is undated but there is some evidence for the grant having occurred in the late 1180s. There is evidence in the cartulary

to show that the Hospitallers were soliciting gifts as early as 1185, presumably in preparation for the founding of the Priory. The Coffin family was one of the first to provide lands for Buckland Priory in this neighbourhood. In 1185 Geoffrey Coffin gave a half ferling of land in his manor of Woolhanger, situated less than a mile south west of Ilkerton and about a mile and a half west of Furzehill.⁶ In about 1189, Ralph Ruffus, a witness to the Ketel grant, gave land, woods and moorlands at Furzehill to the Priory.⁷ This occurred in one of the years in which William Briwerre, one of the witnesses, was Sheriff of Devon 1179, 1189, 1200 or 1202. 1179 is too early as it predates the foundation of the Priory and Ralph Ruffus was probably dead by 1200 so his grant must date from 1189. The lands at Furzehill bordered on the lands at Ilkerton and, combined with the Coffin gift at Woolhanger, provided a triangle of valuable land. Given the fact that the families witnessed each others grants, it seems possible that there was some co-ordination in this and that the Coffin, Ketel and Ruffus grants date from a five year period between 1185 and 1189.

Towards the end of the twelfth century witnesses were still largely people who witnessed by their physical presence when a legal transaction took place, even if they did not actually sign the document; by the following century this was not always the case. It seems likely that the people witnessing the Ketel charter were present since they were largely neighbours or people living in reasonable proximity to Ilkerton and were probably people with whom the Ketel family had regular contact.

The order of the witness list reflects the situation prevailing at the end of the twelfth century in which the ranking of witnesses tended to indicate a combination of gender and status.⁸ Mauger de St Aubyn [Sancto Albino], the first on the witness list, was a representative of a family long established in north Devon. Evidence from a later period suggests that the family held land in Little Bray, Gratton and Martinho in Shirwell Hundred.⁹ The Raleigh kinsmen held three fees of the Honour of Barnstaple including the family estates at Raleigh House in Pilton near Barnstaple, and Challacombe and Arlington in Shirwell Hundred.¹⁰ Richard de Raleigh was the younger son of William de Raleigh and the brother and heir of Hugh de Raleigh. Walter Raleigh was either Richard's brother, who held a half fee of William Tracy in 1166, or his nephew of the same name.¹¹ The Fleming family held land in High Bray and Bratton Fleming, about six miles from Ilkerton.

In 1184-5 Stephen Fleming and nine companions joined Prince John on his ill-fated expedition to Ireland.

Ralph Coffin, next on the list, held a quarter knight's fee of William Tracy in 1166.¹² *Ricardo filio Elie*, who witnessed with his wife Dionisia, was Ralph's brother but appeared at the bottom of the list of men. They were the sons of Elias Coffin of Monks Okehampton, who also had an eldest son William.¹³ There were several branches of the Coffin family in Devon and it is difficult to disentangle them. The best documented branch of the family held two fees at Alwington and this became the main family holding for at least a century. In 1185 Geoffrey Coffin was holding the manor of Woolhangar and gave land in it to Minchin Buckland. A man named Hugh Coffin, who may have been his brother, gave a garden in Coffinswell to Minchin Buckland in the same year (witnessed by Geoffrey); his son Hugh later confirmed the gift.¹⁴ They appear to be the line which, at a later date, also had extensive landholdings in Caffins Heanton, bordering on Ilkerton manor.¹⁵

Ralph Ruffus was next on the list and he held a neighbouring estate at Furzehill, about half a mile east of Ilkerton. This may have been given to his daughter Christian on her marriage to Joel [de Furzehill]. Ralph himself may have been living on the lands he held at Sydeham in the parish of Rackenford which he held of the Hospitaller Knights.¹⁶ He also held land in Churchill in the parish of Loxbeare, about three miles from Sydeham, and in East Raddon [in Thorverton] where his eldest son Richard was farming.

The witnesses living closest to the donated land were Ralph Dean and his wife who held land from Ralph Ruffus in Furzehill.¹⁷ Ralph Dean's rights to these lands were included in several confirmations of the Ruffus land grants to Minchin Buckland. Dean is a hamlet in Lynton parish. Gilbert de Cova, with his son John, was a regular witness to grants to the Priory, a number of them between 1186 and 1191.¹⁸ Hamelin de Boclem and his wife have not been identified. The wives of Gilbert and Ralph were given the honorific of dame, implying that their husbands were knights. However, none of the men appear in surviving contemporary lists of fees and the family names do not appear in later fee lists.

The particular interest of this charter is the unusual number of women included in the grant and the witness list. Women's names do occur regularly in cartulary entries but there are only a *few examples*

of charter witness lists containing more than one or two female names.¹⁹ There were sixteen men and nine women in this charter - three women participating in the donation and a further six women listed by name and/or gender in the witness list. It has been suggested that women often appeared in a witness list when they were related to the donor and may have had some claim on the land in question. The sisters Rameta, Maud/Mahalda and Godiva appear within the charter as active participants, with Maud's portion of the land identified.

It has not been possible to connect any of the women named in the witness list with the Ketel family through documents, but it is possible to make some observations about them. Their positions in the witness list and the variations in the way that the women were represented may be significant. It is possible that the wives of Ralph Dean, Gilbert de Cova, and Richard Coffin (*filio Elie*) were the daughters of the donors. They were identified in connexion with their husbands and so took their positions in the list from their husbands. The wife of Hamlin de Boclem was unnamed and she may have been included in the witness list as a married member of a family which had an interest in the disposal of the land.

The last two women are of particular interest. Convention suggests that they were at the bottom of the list because they had the lowest social status in relationship to the witnessing of this grant.²⁰ However, the implication of the way in which they were included would seem to suggest that while gender determined their position in the list, their connexion to the donor family gave them sufficient status to be included as individuals, not tied to their husbands, but still at the very end of the list. *Dame Juliana the wife of Ralph Ruffus* could simply have been included with her husband Ralph Ruffus higher up the list so her listing as an individual seems to be significant. She was the mother of four adult children and was probably a contemporary of William and Rameta Ketel. *Dame Emma the wife of Bartholomew de Stokes* was possibly a neighbour living at Stock, a farm often listed in conjunction with the Ruffus land at Furzehill. She was possibly the mother of *Ralph son of Bartholomew* who witnessed a grant of land in Stock to Forde in the first two decades of the thirteenth century; she was quite possibly Juliana's contemporary.²¹ This would suggest that both women also had some connexion to the donor family and an interest in the land, but were possibly members of Rameta's generation.

Forde Abbey became active in the Lynton area towards the end of the twelfth century and there are some interesting instances of the same local families once again appearing together in charters, this time making grants to Forde. A particular example is a grant by William Dean and his wife Sara (possibly Ralph's parents?) which was witnessed by William Fauvell, Hugh Coffin, Thomas de Lovel, Mauger de Lyn, Hugh de Fresell, Roger Kitell, William Kitell, Henry de Cranscombe, and Walter de Furzehill.²² A grant by Joel and Christian de Furzehill (Ralph Ruffus's daughter) to Forde in 1202 included witnesses such as William de Raleigh, William Fauvell, Henry and Roger Ketel, and Ralph son of Bartholomew.²³

The Forde and Buckland cartularies provide some fascinating evidence of the families living in the Lynton area towards the end of the twelfth and the start of the thirteenth centuries. They supported each other in decisions made and may have made joint decision on matters such as the grant of land to Minchin Buckland. The inclusion of so many women in one of the charters is of especial interest and suggests that they were actively involved in decisions that were being made at the time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I should like to warmly acknowledge the help given to me by the Archivist Jane de Gruchy at Somerset Record Office for examining the original document and also to Inter Library Loans at The University of Melbourne for obtaining some of the references.

NOTES

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