

Abbeys and Royalty

Cryfield



Men wearing white cloaks with hoods appeared in south Warwickshire in 1154. They were Cistercian monks aiming to settle at Cryfield after being given permission by Empress Matilda. Matilda was a claimant to the English throne during the civil war known as the “*Anarchy*”.

When King Henry I died his daughter Matilda and his nephew Stephen both believed they were heirs to the throne. The monks had left Radmore in Staffordshire seeking a quieter place to live after claims of harassment by foresters. Many locals were unhappy as they were evicted from Cryfield and moved to a nearby village known as Hurst.

Dissatisfied

The monks were still not satisfied complaining of noise from the nearby road linking Coventry and Kenilworth. The *Anarchy* ended in 1153 with the *Treaty of Wallingford* and Henry II was crowned in 1154. Henry II played an important part in the foundation of a monastery at Stoneleigh by granting land there.



Stoneleigh Abbey Gatehouse

Settlement at Stoneleigh

The Cistercians moved from Cryfield to a site near to the confluence of the Sowe and Avon rivers. Royal authority still prevailed over the manor courts there until 1204 when Abbot William of Tyso bought the Soke of Stoneleigh thus freeing the tenants from the claims of the crown. As part of the agreement in 1204 Cryfield Grange became one of the granges controlled by Stoneleigh Abbey. By the 14th Century the Stoneleigh Leger Book provides evidence of a mill operating at Cryfield. Grange farms generated income from the tenants as well as providing food for the monks.

The Abbey and its tenants

A survey of 1280 indicated that from a total of 200 tenants only 7 were villeins who provided services to the abbot of the manor in return for land. Most of the remainder would have paid rent and worked at some time for the abbot. Very few would have lived rent free.



Cistercian monks farming in Medieval Period

Dissolution

The Dissolution spelt the end of the Cistercians time at Stoneleigh. In 1538 King Henry VIII granted Stoneleigh Abbey and its lands to his brother-in-law Charles Brandon – Duke of Suffolk. Charles Brandon died in 1545, and his heirs sold Stoneleigh and in 1561 his heirs sold Stoneleigh to Thomas Leigh, a prominent merchant and former Lord Mayor of London.

Charles Brandon

When Charles Brandon secretly married Henry VIII's sister Mary, Henry was furious. He considered it an act of treason. The Privy Council advised a harsh treatment of imprisonment or execution.

Eventually the penalty of a hefty fine was agreed upon.

Henry's love of his sister and lifelong friendship with Charles prevailed.



Charles Brandon and wife Mary

Henry had intended to use her marriage politically. He had previously arranged his sister's marriage to Louis XII of France someone 34 years her senior. Louis died within 3 months.

Coombe Abbey

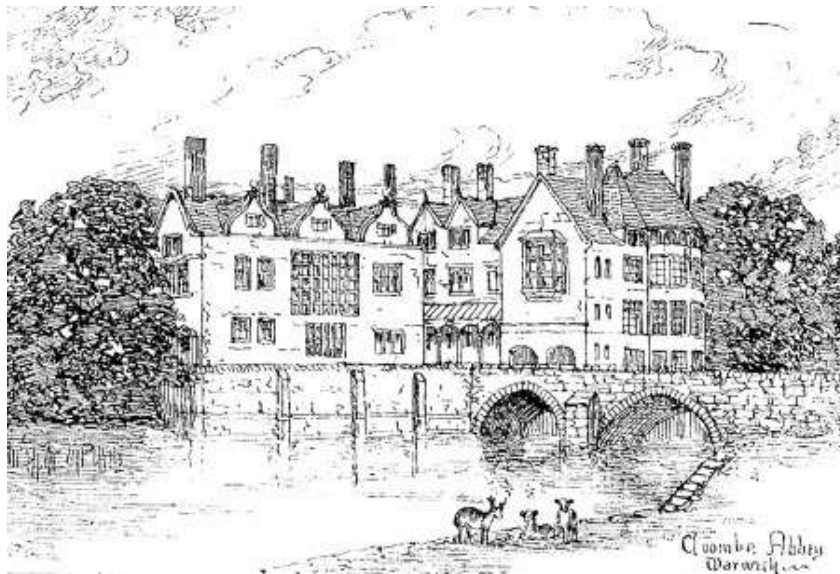


Illustration by John Ingram 1892

The 'Abbey of Cumbe' dates from 1150 when it was founded by Cistercian monks. They were a catholic religious order who split from the Benedictines wishing for a stricter adherence to the *Rule of St. Benedict* Cistercians sought a return to a simpler life encompassing manual labour and solitude. Monks at the abbey engaged in wool production with sheep farming being the main occupation.

Princess Elizabeth

After the dissolution of the abbey the monks left, and the property was eventually sold to Sir John Harrington in 1581. In 1603 Princess Elizabeth the daughter of King James I arrived at Coombe Abbey. Later that year on 19th October 1603 the King issued an order under the privy seal for Elizabeth to be educated by Lord Harrington and his wife. In 1605 the *Gunpowder Plot* failed – a scheme by conspirators to kill King James I and kidnap his daughter Princess Elizabeth. Their aim was to place her on the throne and arrange her marriage to a suitable Catholic husband.

In November 1619 Elizabeth married Frederick V and became Queen Consort of Bohemia. She died at the age of 65 and was buried at Westminster Abbey on 17th February 1662.



Elizabeth – Queen of Bohemia

The history of Stoneleigh and Coombe Abbeys are typical of the influence of royal ties on the religious, social and political fabric of England. From the ambitions of Empress Matilda and King Henry II to the devastating effects of King Henry VIII's dissolution, the fortunes of these monastic houses were shaped by the authority of the crown. Even in later years these abbeys and their owners remained linked to the destinies of England's rulers.

Pete James originally wrote this article for the Coventry Society. As a member of Stoneleigh History Society, he has permitted us to use it.