THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE SAINTS RECONSIDERED
1: ST FIRMIN OF NORTH CRAWLEY

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In Domesday Book, compiled in 1086, there are references to only three churches as existing in Buckinghamshire prior to the Norman conquest of 1066. These were in the county *burh* of Buckingham, in Aylesbury, and in (North) Crawley. A fourth existed in Haddenham at the time of the survey but the entry does not indicate unambiguously its existence in the time of Edward the Confessor.[1]

At no one of these places is any undoubted vestige of a church of pre-Conquest date visible. The ancient church at Buckingham, after the final collapse of its tower in 1776, was demolished to provide material for a new church on a different site, the present one.[2] During recent rebuilding at St Mary's church in Aylesbury, some traces of an earlier building, thought to be of late Saxon date, were noted below the present nave.[3] At North Crawley and Haddenham, the churches have features going back to the twelfth century but nothing obviously dating from before the Conquest.

That the Domesday coverage of churches in Buckinghamshire was selective is evident. Surviving to the present day, there is the magnificent, basically Saxon, church at Wing and there are visible Saxon features in churches at Hardwick, Iver, Lavendon, and Little Missenden.[4] It must surely be significant that the three churches indicated in Domesday as existing before the Conquest are those associated with local saints—St Rumbold at Buckingham, St Osyth at Aylesbury, and St Firmin at North Crawley.

Who, what, when and where were these saints? As about so many Saxon saints, very little is reliably known. After the Conquest, the heavy hand of the Norman was laid not only on the secular but also on the religious administration of conquered England. Almost without exception, the higher clergy of the English church were replaced within a few years by nominees of the Conqueror led by his Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc of Bec. Lanfranc expressed his attitude to English saints thus: 'These Englishmen among whom we are living have set up for themselves certain saints whom they revere. When I turn over in my mind their accounts of who they were, I cannot help having doubts about the quality of their sanctity.' Lanfranc's nephew, Paul of Caen, first Norman abbot of England's premier abbey, that of St Albans, while rebuilding the abbey church gratuitously broke up the tombs of former abbots, sainted or not, contemptuously calling them 'uncultured idiots'. This despite the fact that he was utilizing material for the rebuilding that his immediate predecessors had collected from the ruins of Romano-British Verulamium. An early Norman-appointed abbot of Abingdon dismissed St Ethelwold, re-founder of that monastery and of many others in the tenth century after the devastations of the Northmen, as 'an English rustic'.[5]

However, after this initial phase of hostility, the continuing devotion of the English to their own saints led the church authorities to realize that there was more to be gained than lost by allowing rather than suppressing their cults. A consideration, perhaps, was that there was money to be made by encouraging pilgrims to continue to visit the tombs and other relics. This led to official rehabilitation of some at least of the more celebrated Saxon saints. Even some of the more obscure retained down the

Middle Ages a local fame in those places with which they were associated or which claimed to possess their relics. Such were our Buckinghamshire Saints. What then is known about them?

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About our St Firmin, nothing is on record except for the Domesday reference to a half virgate of land in Hardmead held by his *monasterium* in (North) Crawley,[6] and the statement in the twelfth-century Peterborough chronicle of Hugo Candidus that his body rested in the abbey of Thorney.[7]

The earliest St Firmin known to history or legend[8] was born in Pamplona, where the Encierro—the running of bulls through the streets every July—celebrates his fiesta (7 July, although his day in the church calendar was 25 September). The July date was probably linked to the translation from Amiens to Pamplona of some part of his relics in 1186. After ordination in Toulouse, Firmin was sent as a missionary to northern Gaul where he allegedly became the first Bishop of Amiens and received the appellation of the Martyr after being beheaded in 287 by order of the Roman prefect. A later sainted Bishop of Amiens, St Firmin the Confessor, also virtually legendary, built the church of St Acheul which housed the tomb of the Martyr. This church, long destroyed, stood to the north of the present cathedral, in which they are commemorated in the north porch of the three in the west facade. In all, ten Firmins were numbered among the saints, demonstrating at least that the name was not uncommon on the continent in the early Middle Ages. However, since the resting places of the nine who lived and died on the continent were certainly not in England, none of them could have been the St Firmin whose body was claimed by Hugo Candidus to rest at Thorney.

In England, early Saxon *monasteria* were commonly dedicated to biblical or other well-known saints, most often to Saints Peter and Paul, as was the first such establishment in England founded by St Augustine at Canterbury. Otherwise, the most common dedication was to the first head who was often the founder. The dedication to St Firmin of the *monasterium* at Crawley implies that its first head was somebody called Firmin, to whom the title of Saint was accorded after his burial in the church, which then assumed his name.

When and under what circumstances could his remains have been transferred to Thorney Abbey? This Abbey, from its re-founding by St Ethelwold in 972 after the devastations of the Northmen, was known for its avidity in collecting, by hook or by crook, the relics of saints; the bones of Benedict Biscop, founder of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, portions of Saints Botolph and Athulf, and of other Saints, were purchased, while the body of St Huna, chaplain to St Etheldrida, foundress of the abbey of Ely, was stolen from the nunnery at Chatteris. According to the *Liber Vitae* of Hyde Abbey,[9] written about the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, Thorney already housed the best parts of the remains of eight male saints and of one female. With the addition of St Firmin in time to be recorded by Hugo Candidus about the middle of the twelfth century, the tally of male saints at Thorney rose to nine. Can it be only coincidence that the west facade of what was formerly the abbey church is adorned by medieval statues of nine males? These statues have not been studied and are unidentified,[10] but it may be suggested that they represent the nine male saints listed by Hugo Candidus. Writing in the abbey of Peterborough, he was in a good position to know the names of the saints who rested at nearby Thorney, which had originally been founded in the seventh century from his own monastery, then known as *Medeshamstede*.[11]

It appears then that the remains of St Firmin arrived at Thorney sometime between the dates of compilation of the *Liber Vitae* and of Hugo's chronicle, that is to say during the eleventh or early twelfth centuries.

It was pointed out by Chibnall[12] that an extent of Ramsey Abbey which he dated to about 1135 lists a number of men with priestly names holding lands in Crawley from the Abbey as individual tenants—Hugo filius Gaufredi Presbyteri, Robertus de Capella, Gaufridus Cantor, Hugo Presbiter, and

Ricardus filius Presbyteri. In addition, Richard had a dwelling next to the *monasterium*. Chibnall considered these names to be those of former members of the *monasterium*, by then dissolved since if it had still existed it would have held the lands corporately. It is interesting that the names are Norman rather than Saxon, indicating that an effort had been made after the Conquest to maintain the establishment by recruiting Norman or Normanized personnel. Sometime, therefore, between 1086 and 1135, the *monasterium* of St Firmin at Crawley ceased to exist and some of its former functionaries became lay tenants. The church became the parish church. The likely circumstances were discussed by Chibnall.

As recorded in Domesday, the abbot of Ramsey held land in Cranfield and had held the land in the time of Edward the Confessor.[13] Chibnall demonstrated that it was only later that the boundary between the lands of Cranfield and Crawley was defined[14] and, indeed, the extent referred to above shows that, in the early twelfth century, Ramsey Abbey held land which was later to be within the parish of Great or North Crawley. Ramsey and Thorney, both Benedictine houses, were near neighbours and both had been re-founded after the invasions of the Northmen, Ramsey in 969 and Thorney three years later. Recalling the former eagerness of Thorney in collecting relics, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, at some time between the early eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Thorney acquired the remains of St Firmin from Crawley. It is possible that the transfer from a small, isolated community to a larger and perhaps safer place occurred during the Danish invasions which placed Knut on the throne of all England in 1017. Another possibility is that the community at Crawley may have been so poor in the eleventh century, after all the strife of the past centuries, as to sell the remains of their founder. Fulchard, a monk of St Bertin, who was in charge of Thorney from 1068, was interested in English saints and wrote metrical lives of several, including St Oswald of Worcester, re-founder of Ramsey Abbey. Perhaps this interest directed his attention to St Firmin of Crawley and led to an arrangement for transfer of the relics. However, Fulchard had not received episcopal blessing as Abbot of Thorney and he was deposed by Lanfranc in 1084. Whether the transfer was carried out by Fulchard is not known since, in the Red Book of Thorney dating from 1326, the record *de Gestis Abbatum* only starts with the time of his successor, Gunther of Le Mans, the first canonically-appointed post-Conquest Abbot.

Although perhaps Fulchard originated the idea, it may have been that the transfer actually took place later, around the time the *monasterium* at Crawley ceased to exist. At about that time, the abbey church of Thorney was being rebuilt by Gunther and in 1098 its sacred relics were moved into the new church (which was not, however, consecrated until 1128).

Accepting that the first head of the *monasterium* at Crawley was a Firmin who was later buried there, the questions are what could have been the context and what the date of the foundation? It appears from Bede that conversion to Christianity of the heathen Angles and Saxons, in the earlier years, depended on conversion of the local king. In those years, the area in which Crawley lies, south of the upper reaches of the river Great Ouse, formed the northernmost area inhabited by those called the *Cilternsaetan* in the seventh or eighth century Mercian Tribal Hidage[15] and, at the beginning of the seventh century was controlled politically, most probably, by the West Saxons. The area was certainly outside the effective sphere of influence of Augustine's patron Ethelbert, king of Kent, who had been confined to Kent in 568 by Ceawlin and Cutha of Wessex. Bede names Ethelbert as the third Bretwalda, presumably achieving this dignity after the death in 593 of the second in his list, Ceawlin. But it seems unlikely that Ethelbert would have exerted sufficient influence in West Saxon lands after 597 (date of the arrival of St Augustine) to sponsor the despatch there of missionaries from Canterbury. It was in 597 that the bellicose Ceolwulf, who ever made war against the Angles, the Welsh, the Picts and the Scots, began to reign in Wessex. The next Bretwalda after the death of Ethelbert in 616 was his son-in-law, King Redwald of East Anglia,

who re-adopted pagan practices and in whose time there was a reversion to paganism in Kent under Eadbald, successor to Ethelbert, and of the East Saxons on the death of their first Christian king, Sabert. Finally, in Bede, who had access to information from the church records of Canterbury, there is no mention of any mission sent out from Canterbury by St Augustine or his immediate successors to the area of the upper Great Ouse. It must be judged most unlikely, therefore, that our St Firmin was sent out from Canterbury in the earliest years of the conversion.

In East Anglia, in the second decade after the death of Ethelbert, Felix started to preach the faith of Christ. Felix had come from Burgundy, via Canterbury, at the invitation of Sigbert, who succeeded Eorpwald, another son of Redwald, as king. Sigbert had been converted previously in Gaul when in exile from the hostility of his father. The first bishop of the East Angles is known as St Felix of Dunwich and, presumably, operated from Dunwich in the territory of the South Folk. He might have brought with him a helper called Firmin. However, the shrinkage of the power of East Anglia after the death of Redwald in 625 would have rendered it highly unlikely that the missionary efforts led by Felix would have extended so far afield, against contemporary Mercian expansionism, as the upper reaches of the Great Ouse.

Contemporaneously, it was in 634 that Birinus commenced his mission to the West Saxons. Coming from Gaul, he too could have brought with him a helper called Firmin. However, by the time of his arrival, West Saxon control of the area immediately south of the upper Great Ouse had almost certainly already been relinquished in the face of Mercian aggression. In 628, the West Saxon kings, Cynegils and Cwichelm, had been forced to agree to withdraw from the lower valley of the river Severn after fighting against Penda of Mercia at Cirencester. The reign of Cenwalh (643–672), was interrupted when he was expelled from Wessex by Penda in 645 and was baptized in 646 in East Anglia where he was in exile. But by early in this reign, if not indeed

before, most of Wessex north of the Thames had passed into the control of the still-heathen Mercian king. Thus, the upper Great Ouse area must have been outside the field of activity of Birinus centred on his bishop's seat at Dorchester-on-Thames. This is confirmed in that the traditions of Aylesbury and Buckingham, both nearer to Dorchester than is North Crawley, point to the founders of their minsters arriving from the north rather than the south. St Birinus died in 650. After the departure in 660 of Agilbert, his successor, there was no bishop of the West Saxons at Dorchester, the seat having moved to the church of St Peter built by Cenwalh in Winchester, in the heartland of contemporary Wessex, hopefully safe from Mercian encroachment.

The most likely context for the foundation of a *monasterium* at Crawley would be during one of the periods when Wilfrid, second Bishop of York, turbulent Romanist, energetic and controversial proselytizer and traveller, untiring and munificent founder of monasteries and builder of churches, was active in Mercia. These periods, in a life during which many years were spent in conflict with the kings and clergy of his native Northumbria and in exile from his bishopric of York, are described by his biographer, Eddius Stephanus. From 666–8 Wilfrid, ousted by Oswy, king of Northumbria, from his bishopric, resided as abbot at his monastery of Ripon, except when called on frequently by Wulfhere, king of Mercia, to fulfil episcopal duties in that kingdom, and was given many pieces of land to found monasteries; he travelled with an entourage which included masons and artisans of all kinds. After being reinstated as bishop of York in 669, he was expelled from Northumbria by king Ecgfrith in 678 and travelled a second time to Rome, returning to Northumrbia in 680. A year or so later, he was again expelled from Northumbria and took refuge with a son of the dead Wulfhere, Berhtwald, *praefectus* in Mercia, who gave him land on which Wilfrid founded a little monastery before being forced to move on to seek shelter in Wessex and then in Sussex.[16] After other vicissitudes, he was reconciled in 686/7 with king Aldfrith of Northumbria and with king Ethelred of Mercia,

brother of Wulfhere, who returned monasteries and lands and was thereafter a faithful friend. When Wilfrid was again expelled from Northumbria in 691/2, he went to Ethelred and lived for some twelve years in the bishopric of Leicester, formerly that of Seaxwulf, ministering to the Mercians, Middle Angles and the men of Lindsey. After a further visit to Rome, Wilfrid finally returned to England in 705, where he enjoyed the continued patronage of Ethelred, who had retired to the monastery of Bardney, and of his successor as king of Mercia, Cenred. He was even reconciled with Osred of Northumbria, son of Aldfrith, who agreed the return to him of Ripon and Hexham. St Wilfrid died on 12 October 709, in his seventy-sixth year, at his monastery of St Andrew in Oundle during a tour of the *monasteria* in the region.

Wilfrid had travelled much on the continent and could very well have attracted to his entourage of priests and monks one called Firmin, to whom he could have delegated the task of setting up the *monasterium* at Crawley. As to when this may have occurred, it is tempting to equate Crawley with the little monastery recorded by Eddius Stephanus as founded in 681 on land given by Berhtwald, then *praefectus* and later *subregulus* in Mercia.[17]

Based on his excavations of the church at Wing, Lord Fletcher argued most convincingly that this church was that of a *monasterium* founded by Wilfred.[18] Certainly, the basic plan and architecture of the church have features in common with what is known of churches that Wilfrid must have seen during his travels on the continent and of churches that he himself had built, between 671 and 678, at Hexham and Ripon.[19] This dating of the church at Wing was, at first, accepted by H. M. and J. Taylor,[20] but later H. M. Taylor preferred to leave the question open.[21]

It may be noteworthy that Crawley and Wing, which are some 15 miles from each other, were both located on or near Roman secondary roads connecting to the main Roman Watling Street, and the former was close to the

site of a Romano-British settlement. The apparently pre-existing *monasteria* in the region, at Buckingham and Aylesbury, were also located on or near Roman roads and near sites of Romano-British settlements. These four would have been well placed as Christian foci for the folk living in what is now Buckinghamshire north of the Chilterns, the folk who in Wilfrid's time formed part of the *Cilternsaetan*. It may be suggested that the latest-founded was Wing, which filled an obvious gap in coverage of the region and perhaps dated from one of the later periods of St Wilfrid's work in Middle Anglia, most likely that between 691 and 703 when he was acting as bishop of Leicester, or, less likely, that from 705 to his death in 709. Crawley perhaps later lost importance with the foundation of a better-located competitor at Bedford, some miles to the east.

That the sanctity of the site at Crawley was remembered after the demise of the *monasterium* is shown by a mandate issued in 1298 by Bishop Sutton of Lincoln during his campaign to suppress unauthorized superstitious practices in his diocese.[22] This directed the Dean of Newport Pagnell to go to the church at Great Crawley and find out whether superstitious pilgrimages were being made on account of miracles which had not been accredited and, if they were, to put a stop to them. The mandate was dated 15 August 1298, from the bishop's palace at Buckden, and the Dean was to report back before 8 September; unfortunately, the report is not on record. The present dedication of the church at (North) Crawley, first recorded in the sixteenth century, is to St Firmin the Martyr, whose feast day was 25 September. The mandate, however, contained no suggestion that the pilgrimages were related to the feast of the Martyr and the timing of its issue was probably coincidental. In both respects, in content and in timing, this mandate contrasts with one issued in 1299.[23] In this mandate, dated 26 June, the Archdeacon of Buckingham was directed to announce in all churches of his archdeaconry on every Sunday and feast day until Assumption (15 August) that veneration of, or pilgrimage to, the so-called holy well at Linslade was forbidden on pain of excommunication, and to cite the vicar

of Linslade, who was said to have encouraged the cult in the hope of gain, to appear before the bishop on the first law-day after the feast of St Margaret (21 July). If the timing of the mandate concerning Great Crawley was not coincidental, this suggests that the dedication of the church at Crawley to the St Firmin whose bones had gone to rest at Thorney had already been forgotten by the diocesan establishment in favour of St Firmin the Martyr, better known to clerics with backgrounds wider than England. Obviously, some of the English remembered the St Firmin of their ancestors and still came as pilgrims, at times unknown during the year, to the miracle-promising site of his *monasterium* at Crawley which had its holy well in the churchyard.

The only other church in England now dedicated to St Firmin is that at Thurlby in Lincolnshire, some dozen miles north of Peterborough; it is by the Roman road now underlying King Street and beside the course of the Roman Car Dyke. The dedication of this church, which still displays features of Saxon date, is also ascribed to St Firmin the Martyr.[24] However, the church had ties with Peterborough Abbey and was reconsecrated in 1112.[25] It is not impossible that the Buckinghamshire St Firmin may have had some connection with Thurlby before moving to Crawley. Thurlby was, of course, in an area in which Wilfrid was active during several periods. Another possibility, in view of the date of the reconsecration, is that the body of St Firmin had recently been transferred from Crawley to Thorney Abbey which had close relations with that at Peterborough and that this translation was commemorated by the dedication to him of the church at Thurlby.

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Church History, I (1964) 127 ff. I can find no justification for his assertion that, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Birinus had influence in Mercia.

19. H. M. and J. Taylor, *op. cit.*, vol. I, 297 ff., vol. II, 516 ff.
20. *Ibid.*, vol. II, 665 ff.
21. *Ibid.*, vol. III, 1042, 1070.
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