

Thancredus, Torhtredus and Toua, the 'Thorney Martyrs'

The village of Thorney lies seven miles to the north-east of Peterborough, within the former territory of the South *Gywe* folk, who during the seventh-century occupied the oscillating fenland close to the boundary between the kingdoms of Mercia and East Anglia. We learn from 'King Wulfhere's' charter to *Medeshamstede* [Peterborough] that in 664 a detachment of ascetic monks was despatched to *Ancarig* [Thorney] in search of a more austere and secluded lifestyle. Although the charter is an early twelfth-century forgery, it is possible that Thorney once was populated by hermits living in individual huts or cells, for the place-name *Ancarig* is an Old English word meaning 'island of anchorites'. Yet, it seems unlikely that a self-denying band of brethren would retreat from Peterborough Abbey to create a similar institution to their mother house. Therefore, it appears that the forger was simply declaring that the tenth-century Thorney Abbey occupied the site of a seventh-century daughter house of Peterborough, thus claiming seniority and superiority over its fenland rival.

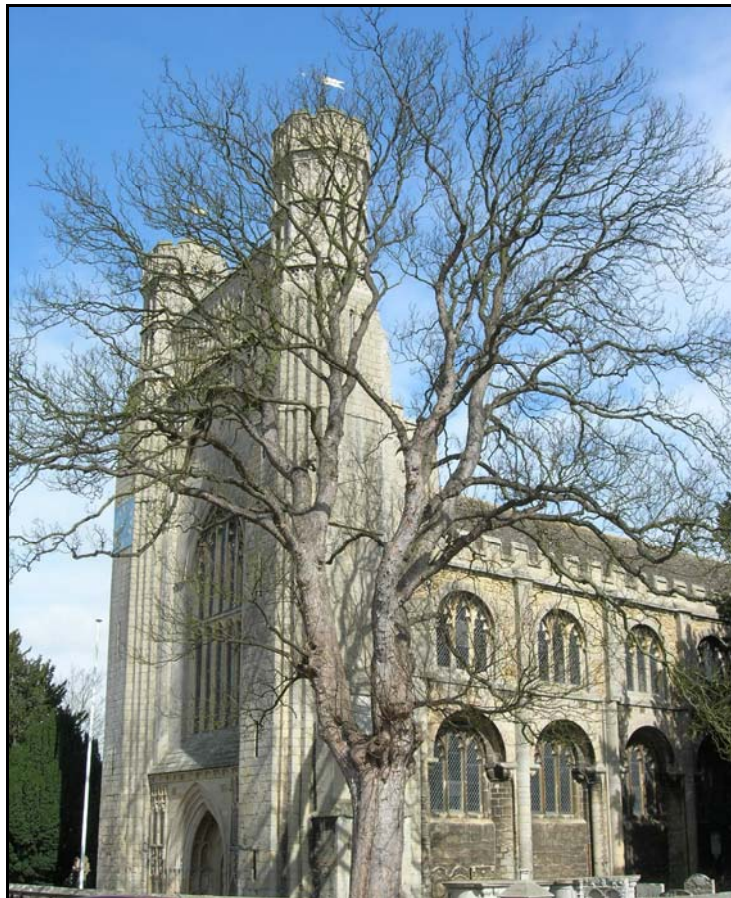
Both the mid thirteenth-century so-called Abbot John de Caux of Peterborough's *Chronicle* and 'Ingulph's' *Croyland Chronicle*, written *c.* 1415, described a flourishing community of anchorites at Thorney in 870. However, excavations conducted in the vicinity of Thorney Abbey by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services [ULAS] in 2001/2 and by Cambridge Archaeology [CAM ARC] in 2006/7 revealed no evidence of Middle-Saxon activity, although it is feasible that the remnants of an earlier complex were destroyed by tenth-century and post-Conquest building works. King Eadgar the Peaceable's foundation charter to Thorney Abbey of 973, which survives only as post-Conquest copies, fell short of stating that a conventional monastery existed on the island before he and Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester (*c.* 910-84) established their Benedictine house there.

Nevertheless, Eadgar's charter disclosed the names of three of *Ancarig's* hermits, who allegedly were slaughtered by marauding Danes in 870. They were two brothers named Thancredus and Torhtredus and their sister, Toua or Tona. After their deaths their cells lay derelict and the island became overgrown with thorns, hence the place-name 'Thorney'. Despite an elapse of over a century, their remains supposedly were recovered by Æthelwold, enshrined within the abbey church consecrated in the honour of St. Mary and accounts of their martyrdom were circulated. Tantalisingly, none of the reports, preserved only as post-Conquest texts, divulge any information about the Thorney trio's ancestry or early careers. Therefore, it is tempting to speculate that their sufferings and sanctity were invented by the monks of Thorney Abbey in an attempt to compete as a pilgrim attraction with the trinity of royal kinswomen, Kyneburgha, Kyneswitha and Tibba, who were entombed at Peterborough.

If the circumstances surrounding the lives and deaths of Thancredus and Torhtredus and Toua are debatable, their cults appear to have been real. They are included in a mid eleventh-century list of saints' resting places, indicating that they were venerated at Thorney prior to this date. William of Malmesbury (*c.* 1095-*c.* 1143), whilst acknowledging the existence of the 'Thorney martyrs', refused to mention the siblings' names in his *Deeds of the Bishops of England* because he thought they sounded

rather barbaric. He also implied that their popularity had begun to wane since the abbey's procurement at great cost of a more prestigious relic, the body of Benedict Biscop (died *c.* 690), founder of the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow and tutor to Bede. The 'Thorney martyrs' feast day was recorded as 30 September, the anniversary of their purported translation to Thorney Abbey, in the 1332 *Kalendar* for Deeping Priory, created as a satellite of Thorney in 1139. No Thorney calendar is known to survive.

Thorney Abbey was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539 and the claustral buildings were dismantled. The stone was re-cycled for village dwellings and for the construction of the new chapel at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in 1579. All that is visible above ground is a section of the nave that now is used as Thorney parish church. However, Toua's [Tona's] name is immortalised at Toneham Farm, built on a headland on the south-west edge of Thorney parish. The fourteenth-century historian, John of Tynemouth, maintained that there was a chapel nearby which reputedly stood on the site of Toua's cell. Local legend dictates that the chapel was linked to Thorney Abbey by one of the ubiquitous subterranean passages which purportedly riddled the fens.



Thorney Abbey Church: the twelfth-century nave and later additions
(Photograph, A. M. Lumley Prior)

Further reading

- CAM ARC, 'Thorney Abbey, Fields', www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/leisure/archaeology/afu/projects/multi/abbeyfieldsthorney.
- Farmer, D., *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1987).
- Hart, C. R., *The Early Charters of Eastern England* (Leicester, 1966).
- Halfhide, D., *Thorney Abbey: A Brief History* (Thorney, 1999).
- Salzman, L. F. *et al.*, eds., *Victoria History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, 10 vols. (London, 1938-2002), IV.
- Thomas, J., 'Evidence for the Dissolution of Thorney Abbey: Recent Excavations and Landscape Analysis at Thorney, Cambridgeshire', *Medieval Archaeology* 50 (2006), 179-242.
- Thomas, J., 'Island in the Fens – Evidence for the Dissolution of Thorney Abbey', www.le.ac.uk/ulas/projects/thorney.