

Forging the Anglo-Saxon Past: Beverley Minster in the 14th Century

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Dr David Woodman reveals the steps
that the Beverley clergy took to fill some
awkward gaps in their legal records.

DESPITE THE FACT that Beverley Minster was an early 8th-century Anglo-Saxon foundation, and despite the fact that many of the rights it possessed in the post-Conquest period would have been acquired much earlier, the Beverley archive is noticeably deficient in Anglo-Saxon documentation, containing only two genuine Anglo-Saxon writs¹ in the name of King Edward the Confessor (1042-66). It is impossible to be sure exactly when Beverley lost its Anglo-Saxon records, but there is reason to believe that already by the early 12th century its archive was meager. Beverley traditions themselves lay stress on the role of the Vikings in the 860s in the destruction of their muniments.

At two points in the 14th century, the Minster faced critical challenges to its high standing and status. Firstly, in the early 1330s, one of its very great privileges, the collection of a grain tax known as thraves, was questioned by various minor churches in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Secondly, in the early 1380s, Alexander Neville, then archbishop of York (1374-88), conducted an aggressive visitation of the Minster which eventually resulted in the excommunication of various Beverley clergy. On both occasions the Beverley community reacted by having documentation composed which was designed to demonstrate that their privileges were of ancient, Anglo-Saxon origin. In one instance an idiosyncratic Middle English rhyming charter was produced and in another a handsome cartulary:² both were intended to overcome the lacuna in Beverley's documentary evidence from the Anglo-Saxon period and both involved a certain amount of re-writing of Beverley's own Anglo-Saxon past.

Beverley charter S 451

In the years 1330-1, the parochial clergy of the East Riding of Yorkshire revolted and withheld the payment of thraves to Beverley Minster. Something of the nature of this conflict can be learned from a letter of the Beverley chapter to the archbishop of York, dated 6 November 1330. Here members of the Beverley community state that they cannot condone the proposal of the Kirk Ella church that the thraves should be placed in impartial hands. It was their view that Beverley's title to thraves was well known throughout Yorkshire and had been since time immemorial. In an attempt to assert their rights, the Beverley chapter appointed a certain Nicholas of Hugate

to represent the Minster's rights at Parliament. Petitions to Parliament needed to be reinforced by actual copies of charters and Hugate can be found taking copies of various charters with him to prove Beverley's case.

It is at this time that the Beverley charter known as S 451 in its current form came into being. The earliest extant copy of this charter is found on a single-sheet in the British Library dated to the mid-14th century. The charter is written across the page; it is cast in the name of King Æthelstan (924-39) and presented as if it were an official Anglo-Saxon charter. But it is very clearly *not* a genuine Anglo-Saxon document. In fact it is a long and elaborate literary piece written in rhyming Middle English of the mid-14th century.

The rhyming charter purports to grant a wide range of rights and the all-encompassing nature of the charter makes it a kind of pseudo-*pancarte*, that is, a document that was literally intended to cover all the rights belonging to a particular institution. Some of the rights granted could have had a basis in Anglo-Saxon times and in Anglo-Saxon documentation, but the majority of the rights being conveyed did not come into existence until the post-Conquest period. The fact that about 30 of the 87 lines concentrate on the issue of Beverley's rights to thraves makes it clear that in its current form the rhyming charter was fabricated to counter the crisis of 1330-1.

The fact that this forged rhyming charter was written in Middle English and took the form of a *pancarte* made it a document which could be updated with new details when required. An indication of this updating process is given by the copy of the rhyming charter that was made in the Beverley cartulary fifty years later in the 1380s. In this cartulary version, six extra lines have been added to the text of the rhyming charter. These six extra lines deal, in a generalised fashion, with rights gained for Beverley Minster in the mid to late 11th century by Archbishop Ealdred (1061-9). The only two genuine Anglo-Saxon documents preserved in the Beverley archive are both writs granted by King Edward the Confessor to Archbishop Ealdred. So it is clear that whoever was copying the rhyming charter of King Æthelstan into the Beverley cartulary had found other charters in the archive which referred to Anglo-Saxon grants and sought to incorporate their details.

The updating of this rhyming charter demonstrates that it had become an important legal tool for the Beverley community. In making its point it called on the name of the first king of a united Anglo-Saxon England, one known to have been generous to northern churches. It bears no resemblance at all to a genuine charter of Æthelstan; but its vernacular form meant that it was accessible and memorable. Although clearly spurious to our eyes, it certainly had a practical function, as two of its most famous lines, in which King Æthelstan is made to say to the Beverley church, 'Als fre make I the, as hert may thynke, or egh may see', are found quoted in formal chancery proceedings of the 14th century.

Dr Woodman's edition of the *Charters from Northern Archives* will be published in the British Academy's *Anglo-Saxon Charters* series.

More information about the Academy Anglo-Saxon Charters project can be found on its 'Kemble' website, at www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww/



Figure 1. Beverley Minster wall panel, 15th century, showing King Æthelstan and St John, the 8th-century founder of Beverley. Photo: groenling, flickr.com

Beverley cartulary

The association with King Æthelstan became all the more important for the Beverley community in the late 14th century. In the spring of 1381, a remarkable feud erupted between Alexander Neville, archbishop of York, and the Beverley chapter. The argument had its roots in Neville's deeds at York, where he had tried to limit the authority of the York clergy. One of his principal opponents at York was a chancery clerk by the name of Richard de Ravenser, who also held a prebend at Beverley. In 1381 Archbishop Neville announced his intention to conduct a visitation of Beverley Minster. This was highly controversial.

On 26 March of the same year, the archbishop entered the Minster and began his visitation. By 5 April the situation was so dire that most of the Beverley clergy had left and the Minster was no longer in a position to provide all of the necessary liturgical services. Archbishop Neville's reaction was unequivocal: he excommunicated those vicars-choral who had walked out. But his most controversial act came when he sent for vicars-choral from his own cathedral church at York in order to carry out the functions of the now excommunicated clergy of Beverley Minster. The Beverley clergy were not idle and harnessed the support of King Richard II (1367-1400) in an attempt to oust Neville from the Minster. Thus on 21 April 1381 a royal official arrived at the archbishop's manor house in Beverley and served him with royal writs and letters which stated

that the king had jurisdiction over Beverley as a royal foundation and therefore called the archbishop to attend the Privy Council. In the event, the archbishop simply ignored the summons and continued as planned with the visitation.

It is very fortunate that we have preserved Archbishop Neville's own register.³ At one point it contains a copy of one of the very same writs sent by King Richard II to the archbishop. It describes a complaint made by the canons of Beverley against the archbishop, in which they cite King Æthelstan as having richly endowed the Minster. King Richard goes on to urge Archbishop Neville to desist from his visitation since the Minster was 'our and our forefathers' foundation' (... *collegium de nostra et progenitorum nostrorum fundatione existit* ...), the implication being that Archbishop Neville had no jurisdiction over a royal foundation. It is fascinating to find that against the word *fundatione*, the archbishop himself has made a marginal annotation which reads:

Nota quod non est de fundatione Regis set de fundatione Beati Johannis, quondam Archiepiscopi Eboracensis, in qua quidem ecclesia corpus preciosissimi confessoris Sancti Johannis requiescit humatum, prout patet in antiquis registris et libris dicte ecclesie.

Note that it is not about the foundation of a King, but a foundation of St John, once Archbishop of York, in which church the body of the most precious confessor St John lies buried, as is revealed in ancient registers and books of the aforementioned church.

The Beverley clergy were therefore faced by an archbishop of York who claimed jurisdiction over their foundation on the basis that St John, the 8th-century founder of Beverley, had also been the bishop of York. Their reaction was to produce the handsome Beverley cartulary, British Library MS Additional 61901, the earliest extant Beverley cartulary. The Beverley community could not, and did not want to, deny its association with the 8th-century Bishop John – it was this very link that had ensured a measure of their success. What they did instead was to modify and refashion their community's history. Thus various passages in the Beverley cartulary suggest that during the 9th century the Beverley church, along with its books, was entirely destroyed by the Vikings and that it had to be refounded by King Æthelstan in the early 10th century. This leads to an almost awkward balance in the Beverley cartulary between those passages which emphasise the miracles of St John at Beverley and those which describe Æthelstan as the true donor of many of Beverley's rights and possessions. The Beverley community was so successful in its depiction of Æthelstan as donor and founder that the 19th-century editor of Beverley's *Chapter Act Book*⁴ considered Beverley a 10th-century foundation, rather than one of the early 8th century.

The threat from Archbishop Neville in the 1380s caused the Beverley community to investigate and refashion their archives and to publish the results in the Beverley cartulary now preserved in the British Library. In doing so, an emphasis on Æthelstan as a *royal* donor became all the more important and thus an updated and expanded copy of the rhyming Middle English charter of Æthelstan found its way into the Beverley cartulary. And this association with Æthelstan and dependence on the rhyming charter are still evident to this day in the Minster, not the least in the 15th-century wall panel (Figure 1) which depicts King Æthelstan handing over a sealed version of the rhyming charter to Bishop John and which has Æthelstan uttering the same two famous lines from the charter that

were quoted in formal chancery proceedings: 'Als fre make I thee, as hert may thynke, or egh may see'.

Notes

- 1 *Writ*: a brief, formal statement (often conveying/confirming rights or privileges) made by an Anglo-Saxon king and delivered to a local court.
- 2 *Cartulary*: a manuscript compiled by a religious house containing copies of charters, writs, wills, legal proceedings, in short any kind of documentation which had a bearing on that particular institution's rights. Nevertheless, cartularies were not limited just to these kinds of documents and could also contain texts such as saints' *Lives* or historical chronicles.
- 3 *Register*: a bit like a cartulary, in that it contains copies of documents that were considered important; in this case, documents that were important for Archbishop Neville.
- 4 *Chapter Act Book*: a manuscript which records the proceedings of the Beverley chapter.

Dr David Woodman is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow. His researches into the archives of York Minster, Durham Cathedral, Beverley Minster and Ripon Minster revealed many manuscript copies of charters that were previously unknown to scholarship. A fuller account of the subject of this article will be published in *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700*, ed. O. Da Rold and T. Edwards (British Library). Dr Woodman is now working on the chronicle (*Chronicon ex chronicis*) attributed to John of Worcester (d. 1140).

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