



## **Medieval Rothley, Leicestershire: a peculiar parish**

**Vanessa McLoughlin**

Many people when setting out on the quest for answers to the history of their locality look to their village church for clues. How old is the standing fabric? Why is the church situated where it is? What can the various alterations within the church building tell us about the fate and fortunes of its parishioners in the past? What do its tombs and monuments tell us of the individuals who once served in the community? Rothley church is no exception. It has been studied by many in the past, and what a rich past it has had! However, this past has a context and some attempt has been made below to set the church in its broader landscape and historical setting by examining its origins and *raison d'etre*. There is much yet to discover, and this journey has only just begun.<sup>1</sup>

### **A brief history of the rectory**

The earliest recorded information for Rothley can be found in the Domesday Book in which a priest is recorded and this is enough to suggest the presence of a church within the settlement in the late eleventh century.<sup>2</sup> Rothley belonged to the king

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<sup>1</sup> This article, which is an adaptation of a chapter from a PhD thesis, seeks to assemble the evidence which supports the postulation that the church of Rothley could once have been a tenth-century minster established during an ecclesiastical reorganisation. For further details see V. McLoughlin, '*Medieval Rothley, Leicestershire: manor, soke and parish*', PhD thesis, English Local History (Leicester, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> P. Morgan, and J. Morris, eds., *Domesday Book: Leicestershire*, Vol. 22, (Chichester, 1979), f. 230 b, c, hereafter DB followed by the Leicestershire folio.

at this time, and so the nomination of the priest would probably have been made by the reigning monarch. In the early thirteenth century the church of Rothley was recorded by the *Matriculus* as being in the patronage of the king, and the name of the incumbent was John.<sup>3</sup> The right to nominate the priest was called the advowson, and the rector who held this right often nominated one of their own family or friends, and as the position of parish priest in Rothley came with land and responsibilities, this nomination would be viewed as a generous gift. In remarking on advowsons, Moorman stated that 'there was a tendency, in the minds of patrons..... to regard a benefice much more as an estate than as a spiritual responsibility'.<sup>4</sup> He was remarking on the manner in which the 'living' attached to a church might be granted like a piece of land, and the ability to make this grant known as the advowson was much sought after. By the later thirteenth century, the priest of Rothley church was nominated by the Knights Templar, and between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries until the Dissolution, the candidate for priest would be nominated by the Knights Hospitaller.<sup>5</sup> Thus the rectory of the church at Rothley was a valuable asset which the Hospitallers fully expected to acquire when they were granted the manor and soke of Rothley in the early fourteenth century, however the acquisition of the advowson proved to be more difficult.

The Templars initially received the right of advowson from the king who granted Rothley in 1231,<sup>6</sup> although the church grant was not made by the bishop until 1241,<sup>7</sup> for the manor and church estates were separate entities. However, the incumbent priest at Rothley was so long-lived that the Templars were unable to nominate a priest of their choice until after his death in the later thirteenth century. Sometime after the removal of the Templars in 1308 the Hospitallers were granted Rothley, and the rectory should also have formed part of this grant. However, this cannot have been the case for in September 1308 the king presented William de Hillum to the vicarage of Rothley,<sup>8</sup> and

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<sup>3</sup> The *Matriculus* is used as a short-hand title for the section on Leicestershire which can be found in W.P.W. Phillimore, ed., *Rotuli Hugonis de Wells Episcopi Lincolnensis AD MCCIX - MCCXXXV* (Lincoln, 1912), Vol. I, hereafter *Matriculus*. The entry for Leicestershire can be found on pages 238 to 279, and is entitled *Incipit Matriculus Domini H. Episcopi Lincoln'*. The entry for Rothley church can be found on p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> J.R.H. Moorman, *Church life in England in the thirteenth century* (Cambridge, 1946), p. 5f.

<sup>5</sup> These rights were granted to them by the king. However there were some difficulties in the grant which will be explained below.

<sup>6</sup> *C.Ch. Rolls, Henry III, 1226-1257* (PRO, London, 1903), Vol. I, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> F.N. Davis, ed., *Rotuli Ricardi Gravesend: Episcopi Lincolnensis AD MCCLVIII-MCCLXXIX* (Lincoln, 1925), pp. 162-164.

<sup>8</sup> *C.P.R., Edward II, 1307-1313* (London, 1971), Part I, p. 93. This signifies also that the peculiar jurisdiction of Rothley had reverted to the bishop.

in the following year, William de Tavistock was presented to the vicarage.<sup>9</sup> The advowson was granted for a time to William de Ferrers in 1312.<sup>10</sup> In 1315, another clerk was presented to the church at Rothley called Henry de Chestreton.<sup>11</sup>

The rectory then seems then to have come into the hands of the Knights Hospitaller against the will of the king who consequently recovered his right of presentation. This struggle must have continued for in 1328 the Knights Hospitaller obtained an exemplification of the letters patent for the year 1276 confirming that the advowson of Rothley had been granted to the Knights Templar.<sup>12</sup> Such letters were obtained by litigants who wished to establish a legal position in a court case, so perhaps the Hospitallers were attempting to take the king to task. Despite this move, in 1329 the prior of the Hospitallers agreed that the right of presentation of the vicar belonged to the king,<sup>13</sup> and in 1337 the king had still not resolved the advowson predicament,<sup>14</sup> in fact the king granted the advowson in April of that year to Henry de Ferrers.<sup>15</sup> In the following year the dispute still continued.<sup>16</sup> An extent of the manor and soke of Rothley made by the Hospitallers in 1331 suggests that these religious knights believed they held the rectory of the church and chapels of Rothley, for the manor was charged with finding two chaplains to celebrate divine service. However in a rental of 1338 there is an indication that a large pension was paid by the Hospitallers to Stephen de Lymbergh as compensation for his removal from the rectory.<sup>17</sup> The Hospitallers had certainly obtained the rectory by 1372, for a further rental indicated as such.<sup>18</sup> Thus by 1381 the Hospitallers had been involved in a protracted struggle laying hold of the rights of the rectory of Rothley church. The power to appoint a vicar brought with it financial rewards, for the rectory attracted an income which equalled and often exceeded the income from the jurisdiction of the manor and soke of Rothley.

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<sup>9</sup> *C.P.R., Edward II, 1307-1313* (London, 1971), p. 100. Two clergymen were appointed to serve at the same time in Rothley soke.

<sup>10</sup> *C.P.R., Edward II, 1307-1313* (London, 1971), p. 514.

<sup>11</sup> *Calendar of Chancery Warrants, 1244-1326* (London, 1927), p. 420. This rapid turnover of vicars appears surprising in view of the fact that this had been made into a perpetual vicarage by the bishop in 1241.

<sup>12</sup> *C.P.R., II Edward III, 1327-1330* (London, 1891), p. 340.

<sup>13</sup> *C.P.R., Edward III, 1327-1330* (London, 1891), p. 387.

<sup>14</sup> *C.C.R., Edward III, 1337-1339* (London, 1972), p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> *C.Ch.R., II Edward III, 1327-1341* (London, 1912), p. 399.

<sup>16</sup> *C.C.R., Edward III, 1337-1339* (London, 1972), p. 292.

<sup>17</sup> R.O.L.L.R. 4428/196 Rothley Temple MSS: Extent made at Rothley, 1331-2. The 1338 rental can be found in L.B. Harding, ed., *The Knights Hospitallers in England being the report of Prior Philip de Thame to the Grand Master Elyan de Villanova for AD 1338* (Camden Society, London, 1857).

<sup>18</sup> J. Nichols, ed., *The history and antiquities of the county of Leicester*, Vols. I-IV (London, 1795-1815) Vol. III, part II, p. 952. This struggle indicates that the manor and the rectory were separate entities.

The rectory also had the rights of a peculiar jurisdiction which gave an authority normally retained by the bishop. Through this grant the rector of Rothley was entitled not only to prove wills within the parish, but also to hold an ecclesiastical court where the parishioners who transgressed church law would hear their judgements and receive their penance accordingly. This put much local power and control into the hands of the manorial lords of Rothley, and they guarded many of these rights well into the early-modern period.

### **Rothley parish: a sub-diocese?**

By the thirteenth century Rothley church had five recorded chapels in Leicestershire, and there were connections with chapels in a number of other places within the county. The *Matriculus* of circa 1230 records that a vicar was installed at Rothley, and there were chaplains to serve each of the chapels, with the chapel of Gaddesby having all the rights of a mother church.<sup>19</sup> A closer examination of the soke dependencies which lay around Gaddesby reveals that this chapel served an area equal to that of a large, modern parish, hence the concession to the chapel to provide the sacraments and burial rights normally associated with mother churches in the medieval period.<sup>20</sup>

The Templars were granted the rectorial rights by the king, and the endowment of the church and chapels was recorded in 1240-1 by the bishop. This grant was confirmed in 1278, during the episcopacy of Richard Gravesend, as an established endowment.<sup>21</sup> This grant included the church of Rothley with its glebe, and Robert of Saundford, then master of the Templar Order, was to appoint a suitable chaplain.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> These would have included the rights to baptise babies and accept the deceased for burial. Burial rights were often the last of the rights to be relinquished by a mother church for they provided an income for the incumbent.

<sup>20</sup> The inter-connections between elements of landscape and parish are examined in more detail in McLoughlin, *Medieval Rothley*, p. 126 f.

<sup>21</sup> F.N. Davis, ed., *Rotuli Ricardi Gravesend: Episcopi Lincolnensis AD MCCLVIII-MCCLXXIX* (Lincoln, 1925), p. 162-164. The point at issue with regard to the document for 1240-1 is that the *Matriculus* gave no clue to these grants of land, nor did it specify in any detail how the chapels of Rothley related to the mother church. Perhaps a re-organisation within the diocese had hoped to alter the jurisdiction of the soke and promote Gaddesby to a mother church. This would have created a separation from the mother church at Rothley, which should have been recognised in the form of a special payment of tithes. Why this arrangement does not appear in the *Matriculus* is unclear. The document of AD 1240-1 emphasised that Gaddesby was to pay its dues as a chapel, and included payments which were to be made by the churches of Skeffington and Wanlip. Had a separation of Gaddesby from Rothley been successful there seems little doubt that Gaddesby would have become a mother church in the thirteenth century, as indeed it did eventually under the re-organisation of the church in the nineteenth century.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, ed., *Rotuli Ricardi Gravesend* p. 162-4. This document is also to be found in Nichols, *Antiquities*, Vol. III, part II, p. 958. There are a few transcription discrepancies between the two documents. For this paper I have used the transcription edited by the Lincoln Record Society. According to Nichols the grant of the perpetual vicarage was still in the hands of the bishop in the eighteenth century.

Although the amount of land attached to Rothley church itself was not specified, the chaplain was to be granted

*'totum altaragium ecclesie de Roleya cum manso persone, et cum tota terra de dominico ipsius ecclesie, cum omnibus ad eandem terram pertinentibus'*

A similar but unspecified donation of land was described for the chapel of Gaddesby. Glebe attached to the chapels of Keyham, Grimston and Wartnaby was reckoned at one virgate each (about 36 acres), and land attached to the chapel at Chadwell and Wycomb amounted to a bovaté (about 18 acres). Thus the glebe reckoned to the chapels amounted to 3 virgates and 1 bovaté, plus the unspecified land which belonged to both Rothley church and the chapel of Gaddesby. In the middle of the thirteenth century the annual values of the glebe and other appurtenances of the church and chapels of Rothley were recorded in the rental and customary of Rothley thus: Rothley 26 marks;<sup>23</sup> Keyham 10 marks; Wartnaby 10 marks; Grimston 10 marks; Chadwell 10 marks; Gaddesby chapel 14 marks, giving a total value of 80 marks.<sup>24</sup> The value of the appurtenances of Rothley and Gaddesby equalled the values of the other four chapels combined, and by inference the total amount of glebe and appurtenances attached to both church and chapels must have exceeded one carucate of land (about 144 acres), and could have been nearer two carucates.<sup>25</sup> The more usual endowment for royal minsters elsewhere could be well in excess of this figure, for as Stenton pointed out, minsters which were royal or episcopal manors usually possessed 'considerable estates'.<sup>26</sup> Thus the case for establishing that Rothley was once a royal minster cannot be established on the basis of landholding alone.

What were the other known assets of Rothley church? The parish of Rothley held modest possessions - there was a house at Rothley with land attached, and the vicar was enjoined to be resident and to have the assistance of both a deacon and a clerk.<sup>27</sup> The rights of each chapel were prescribed, and there was an obligation for a chaplain and clerk to be installed at each chapel who were appointed and paid by the vicar.<sup>28</sup> As compensation for the loss of the diocesan jurisdiction, an agreement was reached

<sup>23</sup> A mark was worth 13s 4d or about 67p.

<sup>24</sup> R.O.L.L.R. 44'28/867, Rothley Temple MSS: Customal of Rothley soke. 80 marks was worth £53 13s 4d.

<sup>25</sup> One carucate of land was the amount stipulated by Blair as being the minimum required by a minster church.

<sup>26</sup> F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1971), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 152. Early minsters needed land which would support a religious community, although this might have consisted of just two or three priests.

<sup>27</sup> Further information about the vicars and chaplains can be obtained from an article by A. Hamilton Thompson, 'The vicars of Rothley' *T.L.A.S.* 12 (Leicester, 1921-2), pp. 121-127.

<sup>28</sup> This grant stipulated the authority which was to be exercised by the vicar of the parish, and gave him the right to appoint his own clergy.

between the archdeacon and the Templars, in which the former was to receive an annual pension of four marks.<sup>29</sup> The church and chapels of Rothley would henceforth enjoy the services of thirteen men, and the master of the Templar order in England would fulfil the obligations of rector and would have the privilege of holding an ecclesiastical court within the parish. This action confirmed Rothley parish as a 'peculiar' jurisdiction and had the effect of placing Rothley church at the head of a sub-diocese.<sup>30</sup>

An extent of the church and chapels was included within the custumal of the soke of Rothley, which document survives in the form of a sixteenth-century copy in the Records Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.<sup>31</sup> This extent gives the names of the churchwardens of the church at Rothley and those of its outlying chapels who served the parish in the middle of the thirteenth century. These names assist in the dating of the whole custumal, for they can be located in other documents pertaining to the manor and soke.<sup>32</sup> The extent of the church and chapel can be closely dated because it purports to have been made when the Templar brother Amadeus (the custumal records his name as Amed) was in office, as was the case in the Close Rolls for the year 1259.<sup>33</sup> Figure 1 gives a list of the names of tenants who can be identified:

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<sup>29</sup> This delay in the appropriation of the church was due to the previous incumbent John of Vercelli surviving until AD 1277, thus the Templars were forced to wait nearly forty years before they could appoint a vicar.

<sup>30</sup> The court for the church of Rothley was held within the church building in the early seventeenth century. See Nichols, *Antiquities*, Vol. III, part II, p. 989. The payments from Wanlip and Skeffington churches, once chapels of Rothley, were also included in this grant, and were part of the settlement of the dispute over the great tithes at Gaddesby, also described within the grant.

<sup>31</sup> R.O.L.L.R. 44'28/867, Rothley Temple MSS: Custumal of Rothley soke.

<sup>32</sup> In 1245 there was a well-documented court case in which the tenants of the outlying soke dependencies agreed with the Templars to make payments *in lieu* of services and the representatives of the tenants were named. This case has been further explored in McLoughlin, *Medieval Rothley*.

<sup>33</sup> *C.C.R. 42 Henry III, 1256-1259* (PRO, London, 1932), p. 394.

Name of vill	Reeve in the 1245 court case	Churchwarden in circa 1259	Tenants and reeves in custumal
Rothley	Not represented	Stephen Page Stanhard de la More Richard son of Nigel Richard Cotton	Stephen Page (tenant)  Richard son of Nigel (tenant)
South Croxton	Milo de Croxton		Milo de Croxton (tenant)
Gaddesby	Walter son of Swayn	Richard son of Emma Henry son of Reginald	Walter Sueyn (reeve)
Barsby	Robert the Reeve		Robert Payn (reeve)
Baggrave	Robert Hareward		Robert Herward (reeve)
Keyham	William Saber	Roger Thok Simon of Keyham	Simon of Keyham (reeve) Roger of Keyham (reeve)
Tilton	Henry the reeve		Henry Prepositus (reeve)
Marefield (south)	Hugh the reeve		Hugh Prepositus (reeve)
(Marefield) (north)	Walter Sewar		Walter Seward (tenant)
Somerby	William the reeve		William de Hascolf (reeve)
Chadwell	Robert son of Henry	William son of Henry Hugh son of Reginald	Robert son of Henry (tenant) William son of Henry
Wartnaby	Gilbert son of Mathew	Thomas son of Ralph Roger his brother	Thomas Clerk and Roger his brother (tenants)
Grimston	Geoffrey the reeve	Geoffrey Pun Mathew Lobyn	Geoffrey prepositus (reeve) Geoffrey Pigun (tenant) Mathew Lomb (tenant)
(Saxelby)	Ralph de Fraunceys		Ralph Fraunces de Saxelby (tenant)

**Figure 1. Names of reeves and churchwardens 1245 to c. 1259**

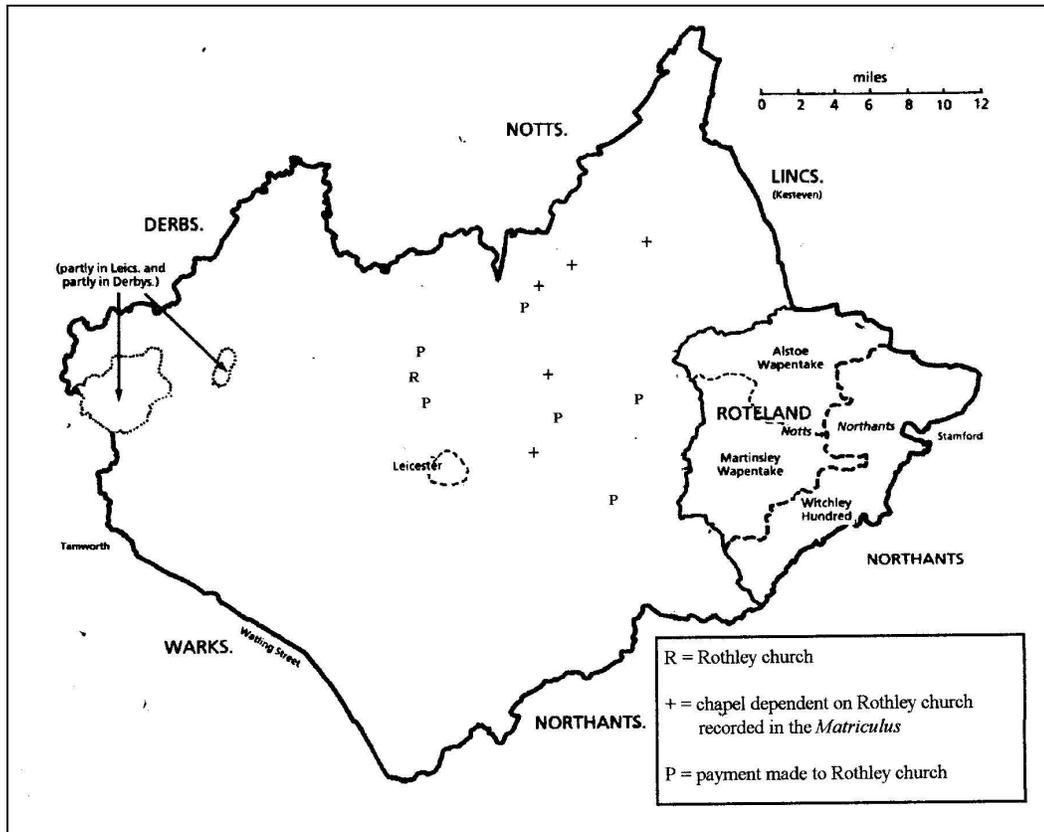
Sources: R.O.L.L.R. 4428/867 Custumal of Rothley soke, undated; *C.P.R. Edward III 1374-1377* (PRO, London, 1916), p. 425

### **The extent of Rothley's medieval parish**

The medieval church of Rothley in Leicestershire served its parish in two ways: the first was as a mother church to its immediate estate with attached chapels which lay in the southern part of Mountsorrel (known as Mountsorrel Superior) and also in Wanlip.<sup>34</sup> Many such local chapels were appearing all over England between the tenth and twelfth centuries, which were dependent upon the mother church at the centre of the

<sup>34</sup> A payment from Wanlip was recorded in the *Matriculus*.

estate to provide the sacraments and bury the dead.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, Rothley church lay at the centre of a *parochia* which extended into central and eastern Leicestershire, with detached chapels lying in five of the settlements which came under the jurisdiction of its soke at Domesday. The chapels of this extended parish lay in Grimston, Wartnaby, Chadwell, Gaddesby and Keyham. (See Map 1).



**Map 1. The extent of the parish of Rothley as indicated in the sources**

Sources: W.P.W. Phillimore, ed., *Rotuli Hugonis de Welles Episcopi Lincolnensis AD MCCIX - MCCXXXV*, (Lincoln, 1912), Vol. I, pp. 238-279; R.O.L.L.R. DE 2/4 Ma/EN/A/24/1 Barsby and South Croxton enclosure award and map; R.O.L.L.R. 4D 72/1/2 Enclosure maps, awards and acts for the soke of Rothley. Map adapted from C. Phythian-Adams, 'Leicestershire and Rutland: contexts, origins and the Domesday record' in C. Phythian-Adams, ed., *The Norman Conquest of Leicestershire and Rutland* (Leicester 1986), p. 9

In addition to the chapels of the *parochia*, payments to Rothley church can be identified as late as the eighteenth century, thus linking groups of parishioners to the church at Rothley, despite their living within the parish boundary of another church. For example in Shoby some parishioners living in the parish of Saxelby were recorded in the glebe terrier for Grimston (a chapelry of Rothley church), who contributed

<sup>35</sup> By the later twelfth century Wanlip had gained full status as a parish church in its own right, but for this privilege it paid a fee to the church at Rothley.

payments to the church at Rothley.<sup>36</sup> In South Croxton some parishioners made tithe payments to Rothley church although they lived within the parish boundary of South Croxton.<sup>37</sup> A small number of parishioners in Somerby paid tithes to Rothley church and continued to come under the jurisdiction of the soke court in the eighteenth century, despite living within the boundary of the parish church in Somerby.<sup>38</sup> Such payments give a clear indication of early parochial connections, although none of these were recorded by the *Matriculus* of Hugh of Wells, and it is unlikely that such arrangements were made after the compilation of that document.<sup>39</sup> Such payments suggest compensation to the minster for its loss of mortuary fees.<sup>40</sup> Although such evidence is often late, Parsons was convinced that 'the occurrence of such regular payments in later medieval documents is one of the means of identifying former minsters and their offspring'.<sup>41</sup> The recent discovery of an addition to the graveyard at Rothley church has been surprising, but should not have been totally unexpected.<sup>42</sup> Given the size of the parish of Rothley, and the number of burials which must have taken place here during the medieval period, the graveyard could once have been much bigger.<sup>43</sup>

### **The origins of Rothley**

At Domesday Rothley was a substantial royal holding, larger than the royal holding at Bowden, Leicestershire<sup>44</sup> and exceeding the size but not the wealth of Geoffrey la Guerche's soke holding at Melton.<sup>45</sup> Because of its status as a royal soke, Rothley church could once have been a minster of some importance.<sup>46</sup> How did minsters with extensive parishes come about? In the seventh century, following the re-

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<sup>36</sup> R.O.L.L.R. 6D 46/4, Grimston, Leicestershire, glebe terrier AD 1757.

<sup>37</sup> R.O.L.L.R. DE 2/4 Ma/EN/A/24/1, Barsby and South Croxton enclosure award and map. The parish and township boundaries did not coincide. This has been discussed further in McLoughlin, *Medieval Rothley*, Chapter 5.

<sup>38</sup> R.O.L.L.R. 4D 72/1/2, Enclosure maps, awards and acts for the soke of Rothley, including Rothley (1781/2), Wartnaby (1764), Keyham 1771/2), Chadwell with Wycomb 1777/8), Barsby with South Croxton 1794/8), and Somerby (1761/5).

<sup>39</sup> A further payment recorded by the *Matriculus* was made to Rothley by the church at Skeffington.

<sup>40</sup> For more information see J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 2005) section on 'Changing burial practice in post-Viking England', pp. 463-471.

<sup>41</sup> D. Parsons, 'Before the parish: the church in Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire' in J. Bourne, ed., *Anglo-Saxon landscapes in the east midlands* (Leicester, 1996), pp. 11-36, at p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> T. Upson-Smith and his team from the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit worked on the site for some weeks in the spring and early summer of 2007 excavating nearly 300 medieval burials. His forthcoming report should shed much light on this period of the history of Rothley church.

<sup>43</sup> The existing churchyard assigns one part for the burials of parishioners from South Mountsorrel, and another part for the parishioners of Rothley. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the graveyard which has been discovered was once assigned to the burial of parishioners from one or more of the detached medieval chapels of the soke.

<sup>44</sup> DB f. 230 c.

<sup>45</sup> DB f. 235 c.

<sup>46</sup> D. Parsons, 'The church in Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire' in J. Bourne, ed., *Anglo-Saxon landscapes in the east midlands* (Leicestershire, 1996), pp. 11-36, at p. 26.

introduction of Christianity into Britain, newly installed bishops believed their duty lay in converting the population.<sup>47</sup> They encouraged lay lords, particularly those of royal birth who controlled large territories, to endow the church with land which would give an income for the support of a community of secular clergy who would convert, baptise, and administer the sacraments to the local population. This land holding would also enable the priests to be free from secular control, and would become a permanent grant. The Old English word *mynster* referred to this house of priests or canons, and its Latin form was *monasterium*. These houses were not to be confused with later medieval monasteries founded for closed orders and set apart for prayer and contemplation.<sup>48</sup> An example of an early minster at Breedon on the Hill was founded in the late seventh century through a land grant to Peterborough Abbey, and gave pastoral care over an extensive *parochia* in a territory which spanned parts of what would later become Derbyshire and Leicestershire.<sup>49</sup> By the time of the *Matriculus* the influence of Breedon had diminished to that of a mother church serving a local parish which bore little resemblance to the extensive *parochia* over which it must once have presided.<sup>50</sup> Although historical evidence testifies to the extent of the early *parochia* attached to Breedon, no such pre-Domesday historical evidence survives to explain the origin and purpose of the very large parish attached to Rothley, and so other evidence must be examined in order to elucidate its function and origins.

What evidence can be used to explore the function and origins of Rothley church? Later endowments of the church of Rothley have been examined above, but further evidence can be explored by comparing Leicestershire with other parts of England. Such evidence could include:

- The architecture of Rothley church
- Late Anglo-Saxon sculpture - the Rothley cross-shaft
- Association with a local saint
- Topographical evidence
- Context within the Hundred of Goscote

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<sup>47</sup> A discussion of early minster sites and their purpose can be found in J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 84-91.

<sup>48</sup> These minsters were often double houses of male and female clerics who shared a communal life and who ministered to a large territory which became known as its *parochia*.

<sup>49</sup> Parsons, 'Before the parish', pp. 11-36.

<sup>50</sup> Breedon has a topographical Old English name, and thus the siting of an early monastery is not surprising, unlike the name of Rothley which would have arisen no earlier than the ninth century. M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The landscape of place-names* (Stamford, 2000), pp. 167; 244-5.

- The proximity of a Roman site

### **The architecture of Rothley church**

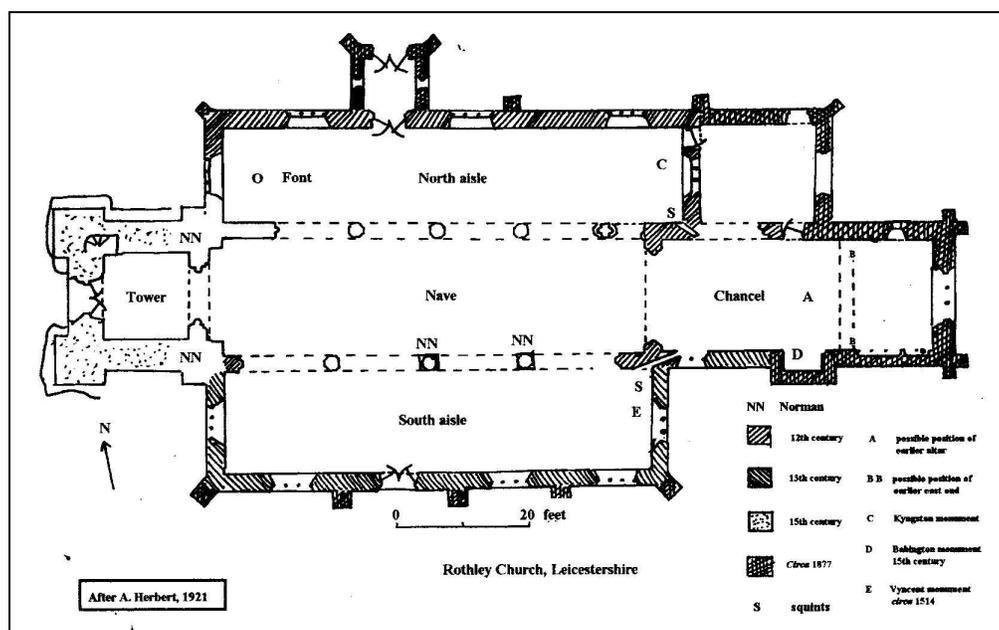
The surviving church building at Rothley is of post-Conquest date, but its double dedication to St Mary and St John was a common feature of pre-Conquest minsters (Map 2). Blair describes a number of these dedications, and noted that many churches followed a continental practice with the name of an apostle being paired with St Mary or the Holy Saviour, with the lesser church of St Mary standing due east of the greater apostolic one (Map 3).<sup>51</sup> Blair's emphasis was on the gradual development of some minster sites which incorporated later chapels, tombs or crosses within the precinct of the minster. The earliest extant fabric of Rothley church is of the Norman period, and the font in the church has been dated at *circa* AD 1160.<sup>52</sup> The presence of a priest in Domesday Rothley is enough to imply the existence of an ecclesiastical building of some kind, and it is possible that this structure was either of wood or wattle and daub. Franklin, in his work on churches in Northamptonshire, recognised similar difficulties in identifying early minsters.<sup>53</sup> While accepting that it would be difficult to reach any definitive conclusions, he realised that answers could only be reached through a combination of architectural and documentary evidence, alongside later jurisdictional and parochial connections. He was willing to consider the possibility that churches which contained fabric dated later than the Conquest might well have been re-modelled on earlier ecclesiastical buildings. Thus a careful consideration of the standing building formed an essential part of his approach to understanding a site.

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<sup>51</sup> Blair, *The church*, p. 200.

<sup>52</sup> Pevsner refers to the church as 'A large and impressive church, of pink granite and grey stone dressings.' The font is described as 'Norman, circular, of drum shape, with an all-over pattern of large concentric lozenges'. See N. Pevsner, *The buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland* (London, 1960) 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised by E. Williamson, 1984, p. 364.

<sup>53</sup> M.J. Franklin, 'The identification of minsters in the midlands' in R.A. Brown, ed., *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle conference* (Bury St Edmunds, 1984), Vol. VII, pp. 69-89.



**Map 2. Plan of the church of St Mary the Virgin and St John the Baptist, Rothley**

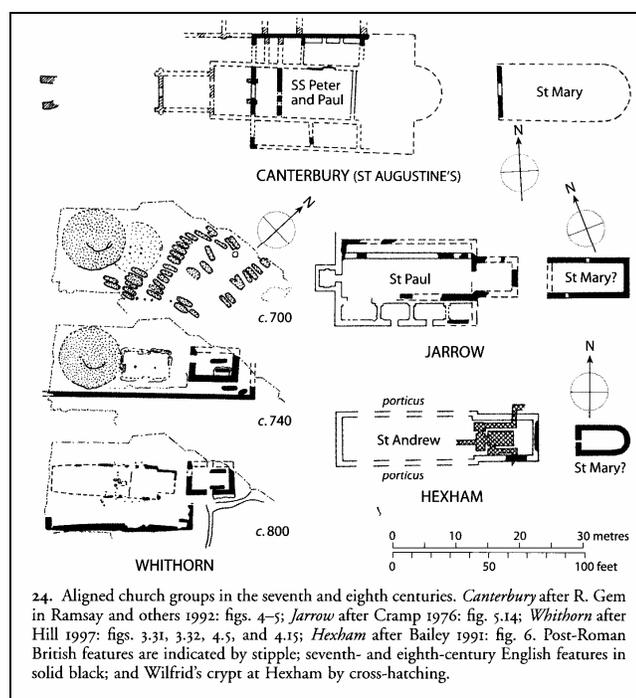
Source: A. Herbert, in J. Wallace-Watts, 'The church' *T.L.A.S.* 12, (1921-2), pp. 100-120

What can be said with confidence about the dating of Rothley church? Although much of the tower can be dated to the fifteenth century, there is evidence of Norman work and the whole stands on a base which is not only larger, but may once have supported an earlier structure. The dimensions of the church at Rothley are worth noting: the length of the twelfth-century nave is 64 feet, and its width 17 feet 8 inches; and the length of the twelfth-century north aisle slightly exceeds that of the nave, being 70 feet long and 14 feet 4 inches wide.<sup>54</sup> Within these twelfth-century walls there are two hagioscopes or squints, one from the north aisle and one from the later thirteenth-century south aisle.<sup>55</sup> The later clerestory windows appear to have been punched through the twelfth-century walls of the nave, thus suggesting that the original walls of the nave were 30 feet high. Franklin believed that in some Northamptonshire churches such high walls could have contained fabric from an earlier period which had later become architecturally obscured by subsequent alterations.<sup>56</sup> The twelfth-century pillars supporting the arches into the thirteenth-century south aisle at Rothley church suggest that the wall was not blank at the earlier date, and could have been either open, or led into a contemporary building. The chancel, which comprises thirteenth- and nineteenth-century additions and alterations, is forty feet long and thus the church is impressive in

<sup>54</sup> It was in this aisle that the ecclesiastical court is reputed to have been held.

<sup>55</sup> It is possible that the squint from the south aisle was created within the twelfth-century masonry during the thirteenth century.

both length and height, giving the appearance of economic prosperity in the twelfth century.<sup>57</sup> The length of the chancel could suggest a rebuilding to incorporate an aligned chapel standing to the east of a smaller and earlier chancel. Speculation regarding the elongation of the chancel is supported by the evidence of the two hagioscopes, for both squints focus on points which are about a third of the distance in front of the present eastern end. From this it is possible to infer that the chancel once ended at this point, with elongation taking place at a later date. The drawing of Rothley church in Nichols indicates that in 1791 the chancel was already long, and thus the nineteenth-century rebuilding could not have been responsible for this alteration.<sup>58</sup> Such origins of the chancel must remain obscure and can only be resolved by archaeological means.<sup>59</sup>



**Map 3. Plans of aligned church groups**

Source: J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 2005), p. 200

<sup>56</sup> Franklin, 'The identification of minsters', pp. 69-89.

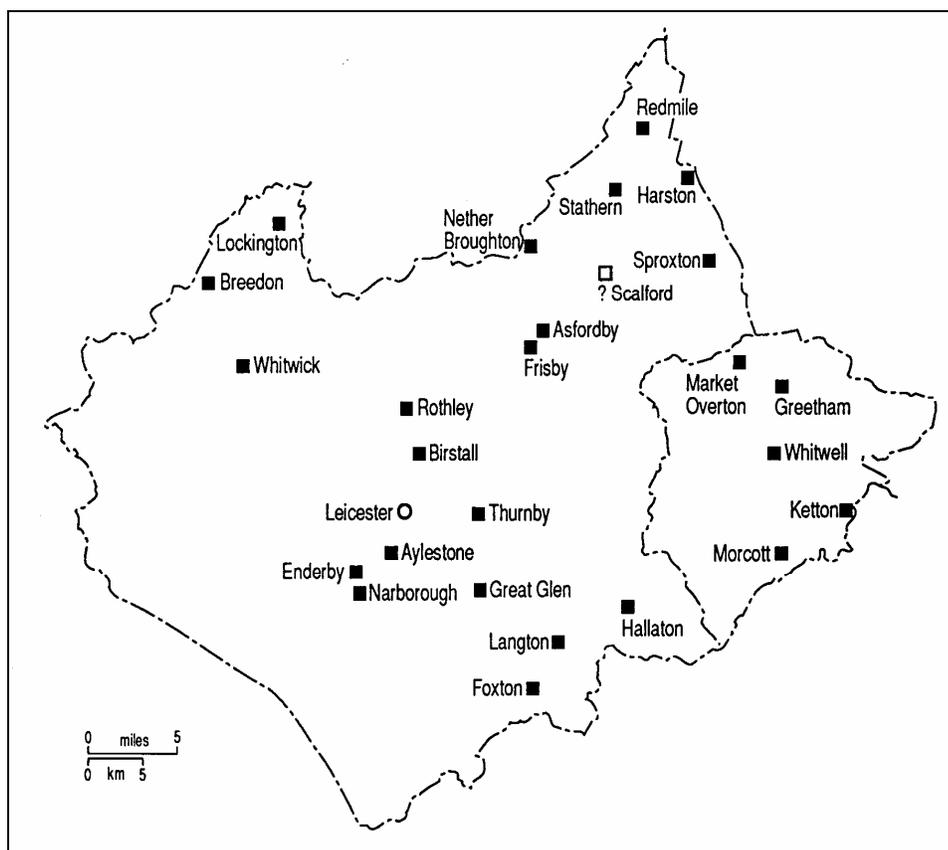
<sup>57</sup> Although this was a royal holding and much of the wealth could have come from the crown, the foundation of the town of Mountsorrel which served the castle to the north of Rothley might well have contributed to the wealth experienced by the village at this time.

<sup>58</sup> Nichols, *Antiquities*, Vol. III, part II, p. 958, plate CXXIX.

<sup>59</sup> For an article on the church of Rothley which contains detailed line drawings see J. Wallace Watts, 'III: The church' *T.L.A.S.* 12 (1921-2), pp. 99-120.

### Late Anglo-Saxon sculpture - the Rothley cross-shaft

Architectural evidence of pre-Conquest date has been used by Parsons as an indication of ecclesiastical activity (Map 4). He put this evidence together to draw a map of possible pre-Conquest churches in Leicestershire in order to come to some conclusions about the nature of church provision in the early eleventh century.<sup>60</sup>



**Map 4. Anglo-Saxon carved stonework in Leicestershire**

Source: D. Parsons, 'Before the parish: the church in Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire' in J. Bourne, *Anglo-Saxon landscapes in the east midlands* (Leicester, 1996), p. 16

Rothley has within its churchyard to the south of the church an Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft for which the dates of the mid-ninth to early eleventh century have been suggested.<sup>61</sup> The cross-shaft was described by Herbert to be in two parts, the lower

<sup>60</sup> Parsons, 'Before the parish', pp. 11-36.

<sup>61</sup> Pevsner, *Buildings*, p. 364. Pevsner states that the date of the mid-ninth century was suggested by Sir Thomas Kendrick. The cross-shaft has been given a date of eleventh century on the Sites and Monuments Record for the county, because of some Viking-type figures carved on the shaft in the shape of dragons.

stone is 10 feet 5 inches in height and the upper stone 2 feet.<sup>62</sup> Routh compared some of the decoration of the cross-shaft to an ivory panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum which had a border of Carolingian acanthus and dated at *circa* AD 1000.<sup>63</sup> The fabric of the cross-shaft is coarse grain millstone grit and probably originated in Derbyshire. The decoration includes a beast of Jellinge-type, and Routh compared this with a similar beast to be found on a cross at Sproxton, Leicestershire, in the north east of the county. He also saw a parallel to the Rothley carvings in the responds of the original Saxon chancel arch of Bibury church, Gloucestershire. He viewed the acanthus foliage of the cross-shaft to be related to the Winchester school from which Brønsted derived the Ringerike style of carving which occurred in England during the reigns of Svein Forkbeard and Cnut.<sup>64</sup> Other carvings on the cross-shaft could be paralleled with similar designs which can be ascribed to any date between the early tenth and twelfth centuries. Similar crosses were recorded from as early as the ninth century as markers for sites set aside for the act of worship and prayer.<sup>65</sup> The occurrence of simple crosses began at an early date, and one of these simple crosses with early carvings is believed to mark the grave of Acca, bishop of Hexham, who died in AD 740.<sup>66</sup> Bailey recognised that plain stone crosses were common in Britain and on the continent before the eighth century, and he described a number of stone crosses from the eighth century which were centred on the cult of Oswald in Northumbria, speculating whether the presence of such cults could provide a possible background for decorated crosses to emerge.<sup>67</sup> Such decoration became the means of indicating possible dates and stylistic provenance of particular stone sculptures, and the style of the Rothley cross-shaft fits well with other sculptures of the tenth century or later.<sup>68</sup>

### **Association with a local saint**

One further piece of evidence which may give a *raison d'être* for the Rothley cross-shaft is the possible connection with the Mercian martyr St Wistan. An early sixteenth-century will was discovered which suggested that the chapel at Rothley

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<sup>62</sup> This description by Albert Herbert was included in the article by T.E. Routh, 'The Rothley cross-shaft and the Sproxton cross' *T.L.A.S.* 20 (Leicester, 1938-9), pp. 66-76.

<sup>63</sup> Routh, 'The Rothley cross-shaft', pp. 66-76.

<sup>64</sup> Svein Forkbeard was King of Denmark from AD 988 to 1014, and Cnut was King of the English from AD 1016 to 1035.

<sup>65</sup> Blair, *The church*, p. 321.

<sup>66</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1971), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 150.

<sup>67</sup> R.N. Bailey, *England's earliest sculptors* (Toronto, 1996), p. 50.

<sup>68</sup> Frisby on the Wreake and Asfordby, both under the Domesday jurisdiction of Rothley soke possessed fragments of stone crosses of pre-Conquest date. Evidence from the records of Launde Priory indicate that the church at Frisby was once dedicated to St Guthlac. It is possible that this stone cross is an indication of a former cult-site of that saint.

Temple was dedicated to St Wistan, the Mercian prince who trained as a monk at Repton and who was murdered in a family feud in AD 849.<sup>69</sup> Following his murder, Wistan's body was carried to the vault at Repton priory in Derbyshire. Wistow church (Leicestershire) is dedicated to this saint, as is the church in Wigston (Leicestershire) where his body is believed to have rested overnight. Rothley was suggested by Lloyd as another resting-place for Wistan's body, and he cites from a will which states that the testator wished to be buried in 'the church yard of St *Wystane* in the temple of Rothley.' Whatever the basis for this legend, a belief that Wistan was connected with the site at Rothley Temple would undoubtedly add religious significance to the nearby church. Just as crosses had been used to indicate a cult of Oswald in Northumbria, perhaps a similar cult had emerged in or near Rothley shortly after the death of Wistan. As a royal site perhaps Rothley had been connected with Wistan or his family, and it is possible that a cult could have emerged here which would have led to the later placing of a stone cross. Such a cult site could also indicate a favourable position for the establishment of a royal church of some significance.

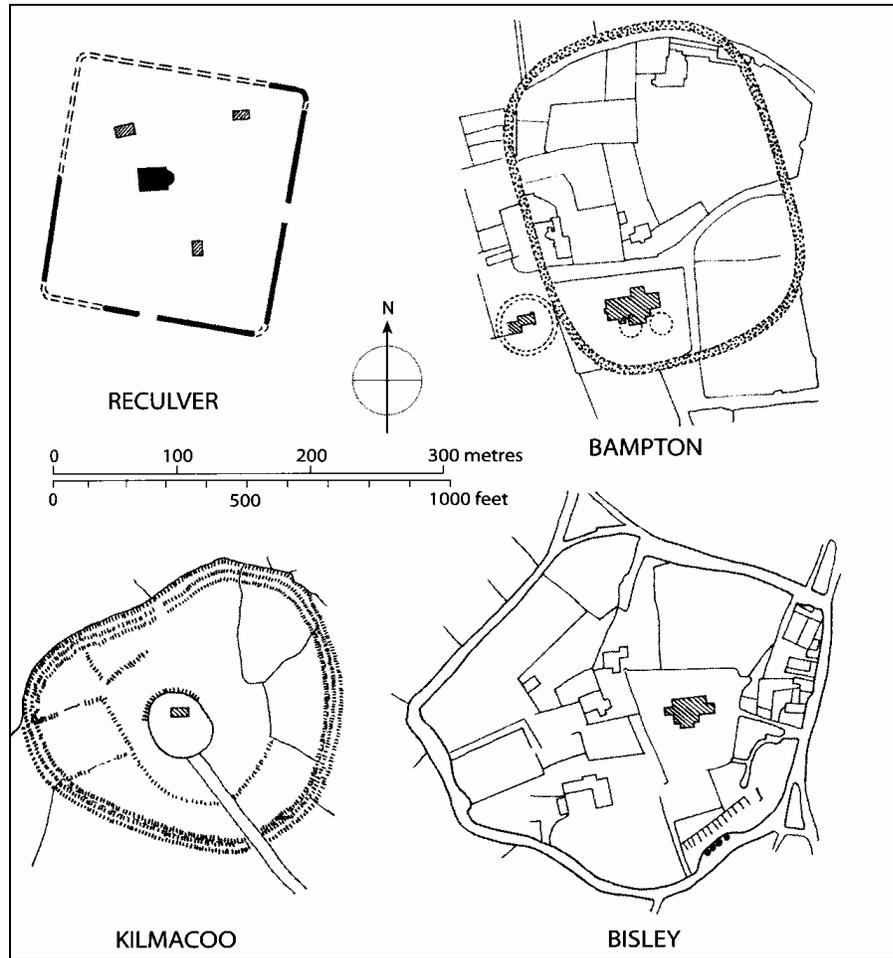
### **Topographical evidence**

The siting of the church in Rothley may provide evidence of its origins. Many old minsters were once part of a large territory, and were given land by royal grant. Blair has made a study of known minsters in an attempt to classify landscape features of these foundations, and to enable informed speculation regarding minsters in areas where the documents are few. Minsters were often to be found in enclosures, either man-made or natural, and such were the minsters of Reculver, Kent, (inside a Roman fort); Bampton, Oxfordshire, which lay within a perimeter ditch; and Bisley, Gloucestershire, which show lost boundary features within the modern landscape (Map 5).<sup>70</sup> Kilmacoo was included to show an Irish monastic site with surviving earthworks. From the diagram it can be seen that many early minsters were founded within an enclosed space which can sometimes be seen within the landscape.

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<sup>69</sup> P. Lloyd, 'A study in the dedications given to religious buildings in Leicestershire before the Reformation', M.A. Dissertation, English Local History, University of Leicester, 1973. There are two contenders for the place of Wistan's death, Wistow (Wistan's stowe) in Leicestershire being one of them. Unfortunately Lloyd does not cite the reference of the will, nor does he give any details of the will writer such as their name or the date of the will. Lloyd has taken the reference to mean that the Templar chapel at Rothley Temple must have been dedicated to St Wistan. While this may be true, there is no indication that there was a burial yard at the chapel, for burials during the medieval period remained with the church at Rothley half a mile away.

<sup>70</sup> Blair, *The church*, p. 197



**Map 5. Plans of churches within enclosures**

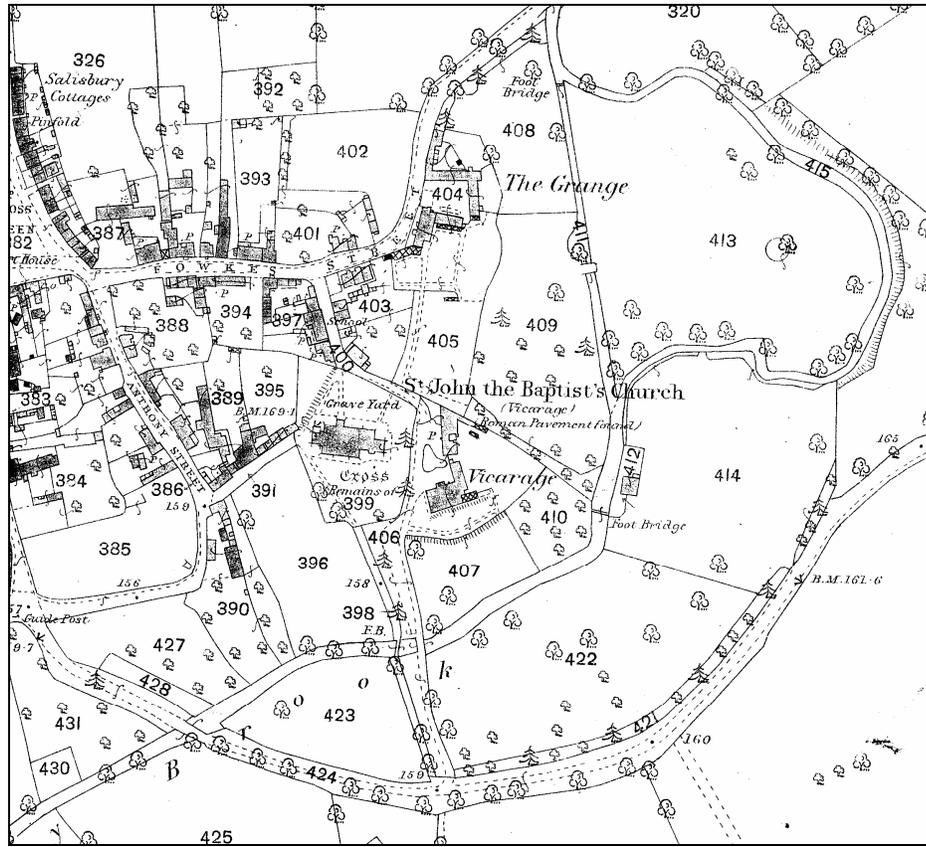
Source: J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 2005), p. 197<sup>71</sup>

Morris also observed a preference of early monasteries for watery sites, and noticed that they were often established in the triangles of ground formed in the angles where two rivers met, citing as his examples Jarrow in Tyne and Wear, and Leominster in Herefordshire which was bounded by the rivers Kenwater and Lugg.<sup>72</sup> He saw that such areas made excellent natural enclosures for monastic sites. Many early monasteries were also sited overlooking running water and examples given by Morris included the Thames at Tilbury, and the Trent at Repton.<sup>73</sup> Does Rothley church fit such criteria?

<sup>71</sup> Blair has obtained some information from H. M. Taylor and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon architecture* 1-3, (Oxford, 1965-78).

<sup>72</sup> Morris, *Churches*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>73</sup> Morris, *Churches*, pp. 111-112.



**Map 6. Plan of Rothley**

Source: First edition OS 25-inch series, XXV.6

Rothley stands on the banks of the Rothley Brook, and this stream is fed by springs which rise in Charnwood Forest to the west, and bounds the church to the south and east where it then joins the river Soar just north of its confluence with the river Wreake (Map 6). The church of Rothley has direct access to Rothley Brook to the south of the churchyard by a footpath which has a footbridge to cross the brook. A natural enclosure is provided for the church not only by the brook, but also from the scarp which lies to the east of the church, below which the brook flows before reaching the river Soar. A bank and ditch lies within the line of the present road which could arguably respect the line of an earlier outer enclosure. This road runs along Rothley House Lane to the south of the brook, and crosses the brook *via* a bridge where there was once a ford. The road continues up North Street, entering the main shopping precinct at Cross Green where a market was once held and a courthouse stood. When the rivers and brook flood, the water has been known to rise some way up Fowkes Street to the north of the church, thus rendering Cross Green the only approach to the church which stands on a spur of high ground within the loop of the flood water.

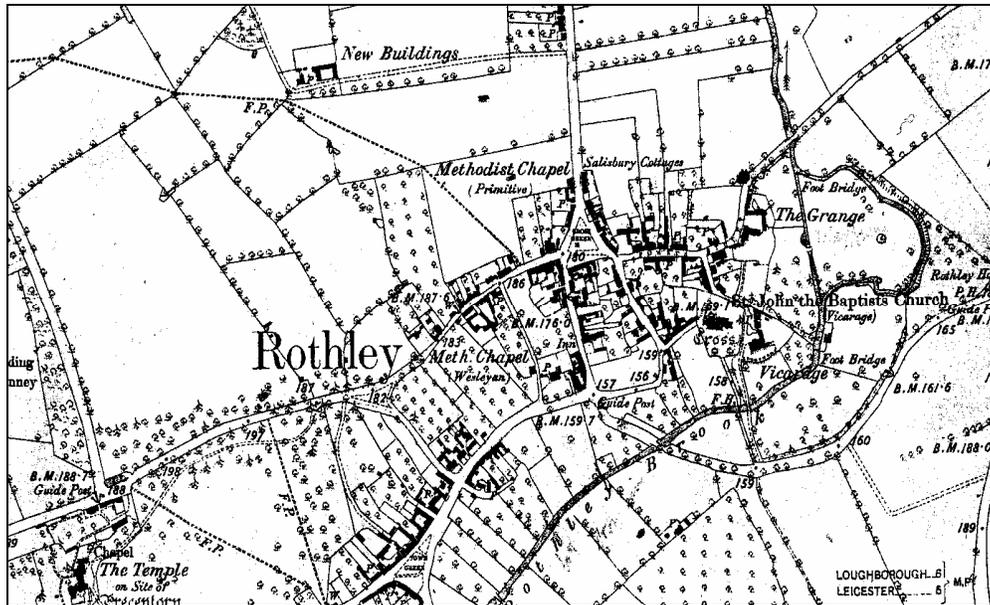
Within the curve of Rothley House Lane lie the Priest Meadow and the old vicarage. Thus Rothley church is in a prominent position looking out over water, and it stands in a natural enclosure next to the vicarage on a spur of high ground within a flood plain.<sup>74</sup>

The juxtaposition of the manorial curia with Rothley church offers another possible link with minster sites. Blair reviewed the work done by Biddle and Haslam who noted that old minsters often shared the same centre with the manorial holding. Biddle gave Winchester palace and minster as an example, and Haslam looked at the *villae regales* with adjacent minster churches in towns in the south of England.<sup>75</sup> Blair put forward an alternative viewpoint in which many minsters were set apart from the royal palace and could later form the urban nucleus, and he cites the minster at Gloucester which lay half a mile from the royal centre at Kingsholme, and the minster at Chesterfield in Derbyshire which lay a mile and a half from the manorial centre at Newbold. At Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire the church was in the town and the Anglo-Saxon royal manor was a mile and a half to the south in Grovebury, and Blair continued his analysis of former minsters and churches which lay at a distance from the manorial centre, frequently within their own precincts.

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<sup>74</sup> Modern building obscures the church from the view of the settlement centre, but if the space to the west of the church is a result of infill, then it could be that the view of the church from the settlement centre would have been impressive. Infill can be suggested on the grounds that a number of the older houses facing this space are substantial, and it can be argued that they were built to impress, and intended to face outwards.

<sup>75</sup> J. Blair, 'Minster churches in the landscape' in D. Hooke, ed., *Anglo-Saxon settlements* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 35-58. Blair cites from M. Biddle, 'Winchester: the development of an early capital', in H. Jankuhn, W. Schlesinger and H. Steiner, eds., *Vor- and Frühformen der europäischen Städte im Mittelalter* pt. I



**Map 7. The settlement of Rothley and the hamlet of Rothley Temple**

Source: First edition OS 6-inch series

Could this argument be applied to Rothley? The settlement of Rothley stands more than one kilometre to the east of the manorial centre at Rothley Temple (Map 7). Although such a juxtaposition of a minster with a manorial complex does not conform to the observations made by Biddle and Haslam, it is in keeping with the argument put forward by Blair. The subsequent history of the settlement of Rothley and the hamlet of Rothley Temple shows that this once royal holding developed in such a way that the manorial site was separate from the church-centred settlement site. The base for power, which should have been held by the manorial lord, was compromised by the prominent position held by the church within the settlement. Although the manorial lords held land within the settlement of Rothley, there was no manorial curia within the confines of the oldest part of the settlement. The most prominent house near the church is the old vicarage, itself a building with medieval origins, lying next to the church, and this would appear to reinforce the proposition that the essential nature of this site was ecclesiastical.

### Context within the Hundred of Goscote

In the tenth century, minsters were attached to the newly formed Hundreds to create a religious focus which operated at sub-diocesan level. Blair discusses the privileges maintained by some minsters in the administration of justice.<sup>76</sup> As a peculiar jurisdiction, Rothley acted at sub-diocesan level in place of the bishop in the thirteenth century, and it is possible that this jurisdiction was a remnant of earlier privileges which would have been granted to a minster of the Hundred of Goscote.<sup>77</sup> The meeting of the moot court for the hundred of East Goscote was reputed to be on a hill near Syston called the *Moodebush Hill*.<sup>78</sup> A number of villis within Goscote Hundred paid a chief rent at this court, including Skeffington, which was attached to Rothley at Domesday, and whose church made a payment to Rothley church.<sup>79</sup> Cox identified this meeting place on a Barkby map of 1609 in which the hill was named the *Mute Bush* indicating the presence of a moot site.<sup>80</sup> As Cox pointed out, this moot site was placed conveniently near to the Roman Fosse Way which leads to Leicester.<sup>81</sup> This site lay approximately six kilometres from Rothley, a manageable walking distance, with a bridge at Cossington to take the traveller across the river Soar. The proximity to the moot site would render Rothley eminently suitable as an ecclesiastical centre acting as an adjunct to the secular justice of the moot site for the hundred of Goscote.

### The proximity of a Roman site

To the north of the church site the remains of what could once have been a substantial Roman building have recently been discovered. This could suggest that the church site was once the centre of a large agrarian estate almost two thousand years ago. The establishment of a subsequent Anglo-Saxon farmstead or settlement associated with this former Roman site could suggest continuity of occupation. The site of the medieval preceptory at Rothley Temple also lies close to the site of a former Roman Villa, and this too could suggest continuity of an agrarian unit within the landscape.

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*England* (Chichester, 1984), pp. xiv-xvi, 135-40.

<sup>76</sup> Blair, *The church*, p. 448.

<sup>77</sup> There were other peculiar jurisdictions within Leicestershire in the medieval period, and these were at Groby, Ratby, Swithland, Thurcaston, Evington, Great Bowden and Newtown Linford. Nichols, ed., *Antiquities*, Vol. I, part I, p. lxxxviii. No other peculiar jurisdictions covered as much territory as that at Rothley.

<sup>78</sup> Nichols, ed., *Antiquities*, Vol. III, part I, p. 453. A Roman coin has also been found on this site. See Nichols, Vol. III, part I, p. 559.

<sup>79</sup> Nichols, ed., *Antiquities*, Vol. III, part I, p. 439.

<sup>80</sup> B.H. Cox., 'Leicestershire moot-sites: The place-name evidence' *T.L.A.H.S.* 47 (1971-2), pp. 14-21.

<sup>81</sup> It lay 2 kilometres east of Syston, and about 3 kilometres from the Fosse Way.

## Summary

Rothley was a royal soke holding at Domesday, and served an extensive parish within Leicestershire during the medieval period. The parish must once have been larger because residual payments made to the church in the medieval period continued to be made in the eighteenth century. The episcopal endowment of the church of Rothley and its soke chapels records land attached to the *caput* church amounting to at least a carucate. The main church at Rothley in the thirteenth century was served by a vicar, a chaplain and a clerk, and each of the five chapels was also served by a chaplain and a clerk. Later glebe terriers, and ecclesiastical payments to Rothley give further extensions to the parish at Shoby, Skeffington, South Croxton and Somerby. Rothley also once acted as the mother church to chapels at Wanlip and South Mountsorrel. The dedications of the mother church are in keeping with a religious site of high status.

The topographical evidence for Rothley as a minster church, though circumstantial, is in keeping with other churches of high status elsewhere in the country. Rothley church sits on a promontory, which is encompassed by a natural enclosure, and during wet seasons this promontory can be surrounded on three sides by floodwater. Rothley church is at the centre of its settlement, with the manorial curia more than one kilometre to the west, rendering the church and not the manor as the focus for the oldest part of the settlement. Both the documentary and the archaeological evidence are compelling: a will suggests that the nearby site of Rothley Temple was connected with the Mercian saint Wistan, and an Anglo-Saxon stone cross-shaft which stands within the churchyard could indicate that this was a cult centre dedicated to that saint. The cross-shaft is a fine example of carved work of the mid- to late-tenth century. Although the foundation of Rothley as a focus for royal or religious activity could well be earlier, extant evidence points to the foundation of the church in the tenth century. The existence of Roman building remains suggest that the enclosure within which Rothley church stands could once have been the centre of an agrarian unit during the Roman period. An indirect link between Rothley and the Hundred court formerly held near Syston gives additional weight to the proposition that Rothley church was once the minster for the Hundred of Goscote. In the century prior to the Norman Conquest Rothley church held an important position within the late-Saxon ecclesiastical hierarchy. As a minster, Rothley church would have served its *parochia* by appointing clergy to administer the sacraments to its parishioners, and it would have received the dead for burial. The growth of the local parish under the Normans began the process of

rendering obsolete the significance of Rothley as a minster church, but evidence of its former influence continued throughout the medieval and early modern periods.

Vanessa McLoughlin

October 2007

### Acknowledgements

My thanks go to the many people of Rothley and its former soke villages, who have inspired me in my search for the origins of their medieval parish. Their enthusiasm spurred me on! My thanks also go to my supervisors Professors Chris Dyer and Harold Fox who directed me through my trials and errors. Any remaining errors within the text are my own.

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**Abbreviations**

C.Ch.R	Calendar of Charter Rolls
C.C.R.	Calendar of Close Rolls
C.P.R.	Calendar of Patent Rolls
DB	Domesday Book
ROLLR	Records Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland
T.L.A.S.	Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society
T.L.A.H.S.	Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society