

# The Fortunes of the Shrine of St. Mary of Caversham

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In Memory of H. Martin Gillett

*Some nine months before he died, the late Martin Gillett entrusted the authors of this short study with the materials which he had collected over many years relating to the shrine of the Blessed Virgin, once situated in the village of Caversham in south Oxfordshire.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Gillett was a lifelong student of such shrines, and the author of several books about them. In 1957 he published his early findings about Caversham in *Shrines of Our Lady in England and Wales*, pp 79-92. Continued investigation, had, however, convinced him of the inadequacy of that account, and he very much wished it to be amplified and corrected. The study which follows is, therefore, written in accordance with his wishes, utilising his own notes and transcripts, together with such additional material as the authors have been able to add from their own researches. It does not claim to be definitive, and is no doubt different in some respects from that which Martin Gillett would himself have written, but it does add substantially to such other accounts of the shrine as are available in print. Caversham was a shrine which flourished briefly in the thirteenth century, when it attracted the patronage of Henry III. Thereafter it gradually lost status, remaining popular as a local pilgrimage centre, but attracting only small offerings. This was a fate shared by many such centres in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although shrines of the Blessed Virgin usually managed to preserve their prestige rather better than Caversham seems to have done.*

**O**n 17 September 1538 Dr. John London wrote from Reading, 'I have pulled down the Image of Our Lady at Caversham, whereunto was great pilgrimage . . . I have also pulled down the place she stood in with all other ceremonies, as lights, shrouds, crutches and images of wax hanging about the chapel and have defaced the same thoroughly as eschewing of any further resort thither . . .'<sup>2</sup> So successful was he that John Leland, passing that way not long after, commented upon the structure of Caversham bridge and the chapel of St. Anne which it bore, but completely failed to mention the proximity of the former shrine, which some had once thought to rival that at Walsingham.<sup>3</sup> Nor did any of the subsequent grants or leases, by means of which all the land in and around the village changed hands between 1538 and 1560, so much as mention the site of the chapel. Not only has it totally disappeared, but no authentic memory of it seems to have been preserved, either in the form of field or road names, or in tradition, and its location has confused local antiquarians. London may have exaggerated somewhat in order to emphasise the success of his mission, but Cromwell and the Council had many other sources of information and he could not safely have indulged his imagination. The shrine was real enough, and must have been very much as he described it in the three informative letters by which he recounted its destruction to different parties, but its history and status present a number of problems.

<sup>1</sup> Caversham is now a part of Reading, but throughout the period with which this study is concerned it was in Oxfordshire, the county boundary between Oxfordshire and Berkshire running down the middle of the river.

<sup>2</sup> BL Cotton MS Cleopatra E IV, f.267, printed in T. Wright, *Three Chapters of Letters relating to the Suppression of the Monasteries*, Camden Soc. XXVI, 221.

<sup>3</sup> *John Leland's Itinerary*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (1910), part II, pp.111-2.

There is no surviving story of its inception, and we therefore have no clear idea of its antiquity. According to a later tradition incorporated into the cartulary of Nutley Abbey the chapel was already in existence as early as 1106.

'In the year in which king Henry imprisoned his brother Robert Curthose, Agnes, countess of Ripon, sister of the said Robert, secretly took the iron of the lance of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the chapel of the Blessed Mary of Caversham, together with many other relics, for fear of the said king Henry. For if the said king had seen the said iron he would have taken it to the monastery of Reading, so it is said'.<sup>4</sup>

In view of the fact that Nutley Abbey subsequently came into possession of the Caversham chapel and its relics, this story needs to be treated with extreme caution. Rivalry between the Augustinians at Nutley and the Benedictines at Reading, each with a prestigious collection of relics to defend, would have been quite sufficient to stimulate the fabrication of such a tale. The chapel may have been there in 1106, or indeed before the Conquest, but there is no real proof. Its authentic history begins with the foundation of Nutley Abbey in Buckinghamshire by Walter Giffard, Earl of Buckingham, and Ermengarde his wife in 1162. Giffard endowed his new foundation with substantial lands, including the Park at Long Crendon, the parish church at Caversham, and the chapel of St. Mary in the same place, each with their possessions.<sup>5</sup> Walter Giffard was lord of the manor of Caversham, which he had inherited from his father on the latter's death in 1104, so presumably both the church and the chapel had previously belonged to the manor. It is therefore clear that by 1162 the chapel was physically separate from the church, which was dedicated to St. Peter, and had something which could be described as 'possessions' — whether plate, vestments, or relics. There was probably no land attached to the chapel at this stage, other than the site it stood on. This grant to Nutley was confirmed by Henry II in 1179, and again by John in 1200,<sup>6</sup> the Abbey retaining possession until its dissolution in 1539. The subsequent history of the rectory and the manor form the context in which the shrine developed, flourished, and eventually disappeared, so something needs to be said about each at this stage.

The fact that the Abbot of Nutley was rector of the parish church of St. Peter as well as proprietor of the chapel of St. Mary (and latterly of St. Anne) has caused a certain amount of confusion. Nevertheless it is quite clear that the two places were both legally and physically distinct. Because the church had cure of souls, Walter Giffard's original grant to Nutley needed canonical confirmation, and this was duly provided soon after by the Archdeacon of Oxford, acting on the authority of Robert de Chesney, bishop of Lincoln.<sup>7</sup> The church also received benefactions. In addition to his grants for the benefit

<sup>4</sup> 'Anno quo rex Henricus incarcerationem Robertum Curthose fratrem suum Agnes Comitissa de Ripon (*sic*, for Ribemont, in Normandy) soror antedicti Roberti attulit occulto ferrum lancee domini nostri Iesu Christi ad capellum beate Marie de Caversham una cum multis aliis reliquis ob timorem dicti regis Henrici. Nam si prefatus rex hoc percepisset dictum ferrum ad monasterium de Reyding (ut dicebatur) detulisset.'

BL Cotton MS Titus F VI (extracts from the original cartulary of Nutley Abbey) f.3. Since Henry did not found Reading Abbey until 1121 the author of this passage must have been reporting some rumour of his intention.

<sup>5</sup> *Cartae Antiquae* (Pipe Roll Society, New Series, vol. XVII, 1939), pp.80-1.

<sup>6</sup> *Rotuli Chartarum in Turri Londinensi* ed. T.D. Hardy, Vol. I, pt. 1, p.46.

<sup>7</sup> From a transcript of the Nutley cartulary made about 1553 in the possession of Christ Church, Oxford (Ch.Ch., Nutley roll), membrane 3, entry 1. This document has not yet been assigned a reference number, but its existence is noted by N. Denholm-Young, *Cartulary of the Medieval Archives of Christ Church* (1931), p.214, no. 13a. This source appears to have been neglected by antiquarians between William Dugdale (*The Baronage of England*, 1676, Vol. I, pp.602, 606) and Martin Gillett.

of the chapel, William Marshal also gave 'to God and the church of St. Peter of Caversham' the garden and two acres of land which lay between the churchyard and the river, reserving a rent of two shillings a year.<sup>8</sup> In 1234 Gilbert Marshal granted to the Canons of Nutley the tithes of his mill and fisheries at Caversham.<sup>9</sup> These, although valuable, were presumably 'small', or vicarage tithes, rather than rectorial tithes, and had remained with the lord of the manor at the time of the original grant. At the time of the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291 the church and the chapel of Caversham were rated together at £16 13s. 4d.,<sup>10</sup> but the rectory steadily increased in value during the later Middle Ages, being valued on its own at £33 4s. 0d. in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535.<sup>11</sup> Neither the destruction of the shrine of St. Mary in 1538, nor the surrender of the Abbey of Nutley in the following year made very much difference to St. Peter's. The Abbey had already relinquished its obligation to serve the cure in December 1535, when it had leased the rectory of Caversham to William Rolte, sergeant at arms, for 66 years at a rent of £18.<sup>12</sup> By the terms of his lease, Rolte was bound to provide 'a sufficient and able priest to serve the said cure, and to minister all manner of sacraments and sacramentals . . .', that is, a stipendiary curate. In September 1542 the rectory 'with all its appurtenances' became part of the endowment of the newly founded cathedral of Christ and St. Mary in Oxford, and when in 1546 the cathedral was refounded with a dedication to Christ alone, it was continued to the new foundation, with which the advowson still remains.<sup>13</sup>

Rolte's lease was hardly a beneficial one from the cathedral's point of view, yet in 1554 the Dean and Chapter granted the reversion to one Christopher Skevington of Caversham at the same rent for 50 years.<sup>14</sup> Either Rolte's lease or Skevington's did not run its full course, because in 1637 a new lease was granted to William and Jane Milward for 21 years. The terms of the Milwards' lease actually reduced the cash rent still further, to £12 a year, but added 9 quarters of wheat and 12 quarters of malt, provisions which were repeated down to 1798. By that time the wheat and malt were valued at about £28 a year, a valuation which was doubled to £56 11s. just before the rectory was sold in 1799. In 1702 the property was described by Dr. Robert South, canon of Christ Church:

'The parsonage consists of tithes, glebe, large mansion house with summer house and orchard; another handsome house with a walled garden, large barn, stable, coach-house, pigeon house, yards, and benefit of burial in the churchyard'.<sup>15</sup>

and despite the changes which have occurred since, much of this is recognisable in the configuration of the surviving buildings.

<sup>8</sup> Ch.Ch., Nutley roll, 3, 2. '... ego Willelmus Mariscallus dedi et concessi et presenti carta mea confirmavi deo et ecclesie beati Petri de Caversham et Abbati et canonicis de Parco . . . gardinum et duas acras terre inter cimiterium prefate ecclesie et Tamisiam . . .'

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4, 8; 4, 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Taxatio Ecclesiastica*, p.30.

<sup>11</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, Vol. IV, p.232.

<sup>12</sup> Christ Church MS Bucks. Ch. 41; M.T. Pearman, 'Historical Notices of Caversham', *Oxford Archaeological Society*, Vol. XXII (1894), pp.53-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters and Papers*, Vol. XVII, p.491; Vol. XXI, pt. 2., p.333; PRO E 318/17/827.

<sup>14</sup> Christ Church MS Oxon. Caversham A.1. Christopher Skevington was Keeper of the Records in the Second Court of Augmentations. W.C. Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations*, p.155. There seems to have been some doubt about these leases. When Anthony Brigham made his will in January 1553, he also claimed to hold a lease of the parsonage of Caversham, although he may have held this as a sub-tenant of Rolte's. PRO PROB 11/36 f. 101. We are indebted to Dr. J. Alsop for this reference.

<sup>15</sup> Christ Church MS Estates 65.

The manor passed from the Giffards, via Walter's sister Rohais, to Richard Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke, and from him via his daughter Isabel to William Marshal.<sup>16</sup> Marshal's son, also William, died without male issue, and his daughter Isabel conveyed the manor by marriage to Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Hertford and Gloucester. When that line came to an end with the death of the eighth earl at Bannockburn in 1314, Caversham passed, by the marriage of the earl's sister Eleanor, to Hugh le Despenser, and the Despensers retained possession until the execution of Thomas, the seventh baron, in 1401. Thomas's widow, Constance, subsequently obtained a grant of a proportion of her attainted husband's former property, including Caversham, and after her death in 1435 this passed to her daughter, another Isabel, who married Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick. After his death in 1439 his daughter Ann held the manor, but it was again forfeited by attainder when her husband, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, was killed on the losing side at Barnet in 1471. Ann regained her estates in 1487, but immediately made Caversham over to the king, and it remained in the hands of the Crown until 1548,<sup>17</sup> when it was granted to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, the Lord Protector. After the Protector's fall in 1549, it passed, by a fresh grant, to his supplanter, John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, and in 1552 to Francis Knollys, who had been the actual lessee for the previous ten years. Knollys had some difficulty in enforcing his rights,<sup>18</sup> but was still in possession during the early years of the reign of Elizabeth.

Successive lords of the manor were, as might be expected, the chief benefactors of the chapel of St. Mary. At some uncertain date between his marriage to Isabel de Clare in 1189 and his death in 1219, William Marshal the Elder granted to the Abbey of Nutley three separate messuages in Caversham; one of 15 acres '... que sunt versus occidentem ab ecclesia et domibus eorum', another of 2 acres, and the third, of unspecified size 'inter Capellam et aquam Tamaisie'.<sup>19</sup> The condition of this grant was that the Canons should provide every Saturday one pound of wax for the maintenance of the candles in the chapel of the Virgin. One of these candles was to burn every Saturday from vespers until morning, and the other at all masses sung in the chapel during the week; an arrangement which was to be overseen by the Prior and two suitable men of the parish. In 1215 the same William made a further grant in frank a'moign 'to God and the chapel of St. Mary of Caversham, and to the canons of Nutley, rectors of that chapel' of all the land upon which the canons had already built next to the north door of the chapel, and immediately to the east of the enclosure wall surrounding it.<sup>20</sup> Between 1241 and 1245 Walter Marshal added a further grant of 2 marks annually in perpetuity, derived from the rents of eight properties within the manor; and at about the same time Margaret, widow of his brother and predecessor Gilbert, made a similar grant of 8s. a year for the maintenance of a

<sup>16</sup> This information concerning the transmission of the manor is drawn from a table compiled by HMG from many sources. See also Pearman, 'Historical Notices of Caversham', pp. 6-10, 13-22, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Henry VII had leased the manor to the Abbey of Nutley for 60 years in 1493, so the Crown's lordship from 1493 to 1539 was little more than a formality. Pearman, 'Historical Notices of Caversham', pp. 26-27.

<sup>18</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, Edward VI*, Vol. III, p. 351; *Letters and Papers of the reign of Henry VIII*, Vol. XVII, p. 636; *Cal. Pat. Ed. VI*, IV, 344. During the period of his lease Knollys three times petitioned against various parties who, he claimed, were depriving him of his rights 'by force and maintenance'; PRO E 321/7/21, 98; E 321/8/47.

<sup>19</sup> Ch.Ch. Nutley roll, 3, 3.

<sup>20</sup> '... totam terram et placiam super quam predicti Canonici sibi edificaverunt iuxta portam illius capelle que est versus aquilonem et iuxta muram qui circuit capellam illam versus orientem que edificia contigua sunt eidem muro.' Ch.Ch. Nutley roll, 4, 4.

perpetual light to burn before the image of the Virgin for the soul of her husband.<sup>21</sup> When he died in 1295, Gilbert de Clare bequeathed 'to God, St. Mary, and the canons serving in the chapel of St. Mary' a piece of land measuring 7 perches in length 'towards the Thames', and 2 perches in width 'to enclose the said chapel for its protection'.<sup>22</sup> This grant was confirmed and augmented soon afterwards by his widow, Joan of Acre, and her augmentation was in turn confirmed by her son Gilbert, the eighth earl, in November 1313.<sup>23</sup> Twenty years later Hugh Despenser granted another piece of the manor, this time 56 feet by 36, 'lying next to the enclosure of the Chapel of Our Lady', to the Abbot and Convent of Nutley, but without any other reference to the shrine.<sup>24</sup> In 1374 Edward Despenser made over the chapel of St. Anne on Caversham bridge, hitherto a manorial property, to the canons of Nutley 'to the increasing of the light of St. Mary' and on the condition that divine service was maintained. Two years later an inquisition *post mortem* recorded the gift, but noted that there were no certain profits, apart from a plot annexed to the bridge chapel, whereon stood two cottages, worth two shillings. The offerings in the chapel itself were casual and uncertain, varying between 10s. and 13s. 4d. a year.<sup>25</sup> If the lords of the manor had indeed maintained services in this chapel, independently of the Abbey and the parish church, it must have cost them a good deal more than it was worth. Finally, Isabel Beauchamp, countess of Warwick, dying in December 1439, bequeathed to Our Lady of Caversham 'a crown of gold made of my chain, weighing twenty five pounds, and other broken gold in my cabinet; and two tables, the one of St. Katherine, the other of St. George, the precious stones of which tablets to be set in the said crown'.<sup>26</sup> If this bequest was ever honoured, it was a princely gift, and nothing comparable came from the Crown during its years of lordship. Queen Elizabeth of York offered 2s. 6d. in March 1502, and Henry VIII offered twice: 18s. 4d. in September 1517, and 6s. 8d. on Lady Day 1520.<sup>27</sup> At this stage Henry was a great devotee of Our Lady, but usually preferred either Walsingham, or the convenient Lady of Pewe, which was within the chapel royal at Westminster.

The lords of the manor were not, of course, the only benefactors of the shrine of St. Mary. In about 1240 one Walter de Hyde, a vassal of Earl Gilbert Marshal, granted to the chapel of St. Mary a plot of nine acres 'lying between the green and the road to Wallingford', with the common rights attached to it, in return for the finding of one candle to burn at all masses of the Virgin and at vespers on feast days.<sup>28</sup> In 1245 Roger of Cundicoth and Cecily his wife granted for the same purpose one acre of land, and a year or two later one John Duredent gave 2s. a year in perpetuity, for a lamp to burn before the image of the Holy Cross at vespers and at all masses of St. Mary.<sup>29</sup> At about the same

<sup>21</sup> Ch.Ch. Nutley roll, 9, 56; 5, 20. Other small grants of a similar kind were made by Gilbert Marshal (16s. rent for two lamps for the soul of his brother Richard) in 1283, and Walter Marshal (4s. for two candles) in 1241. Ch.Ch., roll, 5, 19; 5, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ch.Ch., Nutley roll, 4, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4, 10. *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous*, Vol. III, 1348-1377, p.391.

<sup>26</sup> *Testamenta Vetusta*, ed. N.H. Nicolas (1826), Vol. 1, pp.239-40.

<sup>27</sup> *Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York*, ed. N.H. Nicolas (1830), p.3. *Letters and Papers*, Vol. II, pt. 2, pp.1476, 1542.

<sup>28</sup> 'Walter de Hida dedi et confirmavi deo et Capelle beate Marie de Kawesham . . . ix acras terre mee in villa de Cawesham cum omnibus pertinenciis suis; viz. illas novem acras terre . . . extendunt se de la grenenden usque ad viam de Wallingford.' Ch.Ch., Nutley roll, 7, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6, 26; 8, 46. At about the same time as the aforementioned grant Roger of Cundicoth also gave to the Abbey of Nutley (but without any mention of St. Mary's chapel) all the assart land which he had received in Caversham from Gilbert Marshal, his former lord, for the health of Gilbert's soul. Ibid., 6, 25.

time Herbert de Bolbec gave a pound of wax annually, to the value of 5*d.* but the most significant benefactor of this period was undoubtedly the pious king Henry III. In October 1238 he provided the Canons of Nutley serving at Caversham with two oak trees for the building of a boat to ferry pilgrims across the river to the shrine.<sup>30</sup> In 1239 Brother William, the chaplain of the chapel, was given an oak tree from the nearby forest of Windsor for the making of roof shingles, and two years later three more trees were given for the same purpose, which suggests extensive rebuilding.<sup>31</sup> This impression is confirmed by a gift of 40*s.* out of the Exchequer in 1246 'for the works of St. Mary's chapel', and by a further grant of four oak trees in 1259,<sup>32</sup> although it is possible that the 'works' in the latter case were at St. Peter's. Henry also made other gifts; a four pound wax candle in 1239, 1500 tapers in 1241, a chasuble of red velvet in 1246.<sup>33</sup> The king seems to have had a particular devotion to St. Mary, and two of his gifts to Caversham were associated with similar benefactions at Walsingham. In 1239 an identical candle went to the Norfolk shrine, while in 1241 Walsingham received 3000 tapers. No subsequent monarch, or any great magnate apart from the manorial lords, showed comparable interest, and the appeal of Caversham appears to have declined in the fourteenth century. Later gifts are perhaps fairly represented by the will of William Wrottesley of Reading, who died in 1512, leaving five tapers of 4*d.* each to Walsingham, five to Caversham and five to St. Mary's Reading, although by this period even small local benefactions seem to have been rare.<sup>34</sup> Many benefactors remain untraceable. We do not know who gave the silver tabernacle which was already in position by 1439, when the countess of Warwick bequeathed a similar adornment to the shrine at Walsingham.<sup>35</sup> Isabel Beauchamp seems to have been the last major patron of Caversham. Queen Catherine of Aragon, who was an indefatigable pilgrim, is only known to have visited it once, in 1522, although she must often have been in the vicinity, and is not known to have made any benefaction at all.<sup>36</sup>

By the time that Dr. John London arrived in 1538, the shrine had a mainly local significance: it still attracted pilgrims but benefactions had ceased. London reported, '... there came in not as few as a dozen with images of wax ...'<sup>37</sup> but 'great pilgrimage' was perhaps an exaggeration. The offerings had been valued at £8 in 1535, a figure comparable with that recorded at the same time for dozens of minor shrines up and down the country, and bearing no relation to the £250 1*s.* which was offered annually at Walsingham.<sup>38</sup> Nor was the collection of relics as celebrated as London's account might make it appear. The spearhead mentioned in the Nutley cartulary was still there, but was overshadowed in London's eyes by what he called 'the principall relik of idolatry within this realme ...', an angel with one wing, who was supposed to have brought the relic from the Holy Land; presumably he referred to an image or picture, because he sent it up to London along with the main image of Our Lady. The chapel also possessed 'the dagger that they say slew king Henry VI, and the knife that killed St. Edward, with many other

<sup>30</sup> *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1237-1242*, p.108.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pp.164, 375.

<sup>32</sup> *Liberate Rolls of Henry III, 1245-1251*, p.31; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1256-1259*, p.397.

<sup>33</sup> *Liberate Rolls of Henry III, 1226-1240*, p.398; *Liberate Rolls ... 1240-1245*, p.66; *Close Rolls, 1242-1247*, p.393.

<sup>34</sup> Somerset House MSS. P.C.C. Fetipace; 26 December 1512. Mrs J.E. Martin, who has worked through the early 16th century wills for Reading, has found no other example.

<sup>35</sup> 'I will that ... unto our Lady of Walsingham be offered ... a tabernacle of silver like in timbre to that over our Lady of Caversham.' *Testamenta Vetusta*, p.239.

<sup>36</sup> Sir Robert Wingfield to Wolsey, 17 July 1522. *Letters and Papers*, vol. III, pt. 2, no. 2393.

<sup>37</sup> BL Ms Cotton Cleopatra E IV f.268 (printed in Wright, *Three Chapters*, p.224). The 'images' were models of people (or parts of people) for whom healing was desired.

<sup>38</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol. III, p.388.

like holy things' including 'a piece of the holy halter Judas was hanged withal'.<sup>39</sup> It was London's business to be sceptical, and to exaggerate the dangers of 'superstition', which makes it easy to overlook the fact that there was nothing particularly remarkable about the Caversham collection. At the same time Reading Abbey, just across the river, possessed two pieces of the true cross, a hand of St. James, and bones of twenty other named saints 'with many others'.<sup>40</sup> Nor is there any reason to suppose that the concentration in the Thames valley was unusually high. The canon who was ministering in the chapel of St. Mary at the time of its suppression made an unsuccessful bid to smuggle some of its relics back to Nutley,<sup>41</sup> but there is no other suggestion that local piety or indignation impeded London in his task to the smallest degree.

Indeed, he was more worried about pillage than about opposition. Having 'defaced the chapel inwardly', he locked the doors and requested instruction regarding the disposal of the lead which covered the roof. '... if it is not so ordered the chapel standeth so wildly that the lead will be stolen by night, as I was served at the friars ...', he wrote apprehensively.<sup>42</sup> Who eventually gained the lead, we do not know; but the squared building stones were also a valuable commodity, and within a very few years, as we have seen, the chapel had completely disappeared. However, the chapel was not the only building on the site. There was in addition 'a proper lodging where the canon lay with a fair garden and an orchard ...', which, as London noted, was 'meet to be bestowed upon some friend of your lordship's in these parts', despite the fact that it still technically belonged to Nutley Abbey. Such a building was unlikely to be wasted, and like the church of the Grey Friars in Reading, which was sold to the citizens for use as a Town Hall, would certainly have been converted to secular purposes.<sup>43</sup> Given London's extreme care over valuables of all kinds, and the fact that he specifically described the image of Our Lady as 'plated over with silver', it is odd that he made no mention of the jewelled golden crown of Isabel Beauchamp's bequest. Perhaps the Canons of Nutley had put it to other uses; perhaps the will had never been honoured. We can be reasonably sure that no such treasure remained at Caversham when the shrine was suppressed.

When the estates of Nutley were valued at its dissolution in 1539, no mention was made of the chapel or its site. Instead 'the farm of the manor of Canonend', with certain copyholds belonging to it, was judged to be worth £7 11s. 8d. a year, and Canonend included a 'void space lying in Caversham, in length 333 feet in the possession of the

<sup>39</sup> MS Cotton Cleo. E IV, f.268 (Wright, *Three Chapters*, pp.224, 225).

<sup>40</sup> MS Cotton Cleo. E IV, f.265. 'The inventory of the relics of the house of Reading' (which London had caused to be taken). After about two dozen items the compiler concluded 'There be a multitude of small bones and other things which would occupy four sheets of paper to make particularly an inventory of every part thereof ...'.

<sup>41</sup> MS Cotton Cleo. E IV, f.268 (Wright, *Three Chapters*, pp. 225, 226) The identity of this 'capellanus' is not certain. When the bishop of Lincoln had conducted a visitation in the deanery of Henley in 1530 a certain Richard Wells had held that position. Five years later, at the time of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, John Merston was named, but neither of these men appear on the list of those given capacities from Nutley in 1539. By contrast the incumbency of the parish church had been held since at least 1526 by Richard Barker, who did receive a capacity. *Visitations in the diocese of Lincoln, 1517-1531*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Lincoln Record Society), vol. II, p.67; *Faculty Office Registers, 1534-1549*, ed. D.S. Chambers, pp. 142, 174; *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol. II, p.166.

<sup>42</sup> MS Cotton Cleo. E IV, f.267. Of his experience with the Grey Friars in Reading, he had written shortly before 'This is a town of most poor people, and they fell to stealing so fast in every corner of the house that I have been fain to tarry a whole week here to set everything in due order'. Ibid., f.264.

<sup>43</sup> London strongly backed the petition of the citizens of Reading to be allowed to purchase the Grey Friars church; 'They have a fair town', he wrote, 'and many good occupiers in it, but they lack that house necessary of the which for the ministration of justice they have most need of ...' Ibid., f.267.

churchwardens of Caversham at 16d. a year'.<sup>44</sup> In July 1544 the lands of Canonend were sold to Anthony Brigham 'of the household' for £168 1s. 8d. and the particulars of grant make it clear that 'Canonend' consisted primarily of the lands given to Nutley in the first grant of William Marshal, with the addition of some plots of uncertain origin.<sup>45</sup> Also included in the sale was a separate tenement called 'Portareyns', valued at 10s. a year 'which had been granted to John Ridge, former Abbot of Nutley, for life'.<sup>46</sup> Portareyns was not an integral part of Canonend, and was almost certainly the 'proper lodging' with its garden and orchard, which had previously been occupied by the Canon Warden of the shrine. Since Canonend was valued in the particulars at £8 8s. 8d., Brigham paid rather less than twenty years purchase for his grant — which is what one would expect for a gentleman of the household.<sup>47</sup> Whether the site of the chapel was part of the tenement of Portareyns, or should be identified with the 'void space' mentioned above seems impossible to determine. In 1546 Brigham sold Portareyns to Francis Knollys,<sup>48</sup> and when the latter obtained the grant of the manor of Caversham in 1552, it was for all practical purposes merged in the major estate.

An enquiry held in 1552 to determine responsibility for the repair of Caversham bridge, reveals something of the complexity of the tenurial situation which had developed in the wake of the Dissolution. Fifteen tenants gave sworn testimony.<sup>49</sup>

'They all depose and say that the king's majesty ought to make of Caversham Bridge by reason of his manor of Reading . . . seven perches . . . Twenty one feet of the said bridge Francis Knollys, kt. ought to repair as Lord of the manor of Caversham . . . Twenty one feet of the said bridge ought to be repaired by Anthony Brigham, gent. by reason of a chapel called St. Anne's chapel late standing there whereof he among other things is ceased, as in the past has been done by the late Abbot of Nutley, whose estate therein he hath from the king . . .'

St. Anne's chapel with a rood of meadow and the fishing rights, had been leased by the Crown to William Penyson in 1543 and (still in Penyson's tenure) granted to the Duke of Somerset in 1548.<sup>50</sup> Presumably Brigham had obtained it after Somerset's attainder, although there seems to be no record of the grant. It is also possible that the tenants were mistaken, and that Brigham's 'estate' was in the manor of Canonend, and not in the

<sup>44</sup> PRO SC6 Henry VIII, 237.

<sup>45</sup> PRO E318/5/170; Pearman, 'Historical Notices of Caversham' p.31.

<sup>46</sup> PRO E318/5/170; Whether Ridge had already sold his interest, or whether the 'grant' was actually a lease is not clear. Ridge was still alive in 1547, when he was named in a general pardon granted for involvement in the treason of Anthony Fortescue. In that document he is described as 'formerly Abbot of Nutley, alias late of Caversham'. *Cal.Pat. Ed. VI*, vol. II, p.138.

<sup>47</sup> Twenty years purchase (i.e. twenty times the annual value) was the normal sale price. A gentleman of the household could have expected slightly preferential terms.

<sup>48</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. XXI pt. 2, p.245.

<sup>49</sup> PRO E315/122 f.152 'A declaration of the tenants of the manor of Caversham taken on oath before Thomas Bullock and Thomas Vachell esqrs., 3rd Nov. 6 Edward VI'.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. XVIII, pt. 1, p.195. *Cal.Pat. Ed. VI*, vol. II, p.28. Devotion to St. Anne, like that to St. Mary, had a long and obscure history at Caversham. An early 18th-century rector, the Rev. J. Loveday, wrote to the antiquarian Thomas Hearne that the Chapel on Caversham bridge 'was dedicated to St. Anne and from thence the religious went at certain times to a well now in the hedge between the field called the Mount and the lane called Priest lane, which is supposed to have its name from their going through it to the well which was formerly called St. Anne's well . . .'. Quoted by E. Margrett in the *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, vol. XII, p.26. This well, which seems to have been considerably older than the bridge chapel, was rediscovered in the 1920s. One William Penyson, or Penson, had been a yeoman of the Kings Guard and chamberer to Henry VIII in the 1540s. *Letters and Papers*, *passim*.

chapel of St. Anne. Eight years later, in the process of confirming the liberties of the borough of Reading, Elizabeth granted the corporation the reversion of the chapel and meadow, describing it simply as 'late in the tenure of William Penson, kt.'<sup>51</sup> In most respects this Patent confirms the picture painted by the tenants of Caversham, but it also contains a grant to the town of 'Le Lytle Orte lands, the site of the Holy Ghost chapel at Caversham bridge, now destroyed'. Although it is not impossible, it seems unlikely that this description refers to the former shrine in Caversham. There may well have been at one time another chapel at the south end of the bridge, and occasional references to 'chapels' in the plural also indicate that this was so.

Although the pattern becomes a little clearer on investigation, therefore, it is still not certain where the chapel of St. Mary was situated. It was not adjacent to the parish church, nor was it between the church and the river, because that land, granted to St. Peter's by William Marshal, became part of the Rectory. It was, however, far enough from the Thames for the land between to be the subject of a separate grant, again by William Marshal; moreover, since the benefactor withheld the fishpond which was situated within the plot granted, its extent must have been considerable.<sup>52</sup> It is clear from a number of references that the chapel and the warden's house, with its garden and orchard were contiguous, and William Marshal's grant of 1215, which refers to buildings next to the north door of the chapel as well as to the east of the enclosure, suggests more extensive accommodation. There may, at one time, have been more than one canon serving the shrine. Henry III's grants are couched in various terms; twice he refers to the 'Canon custodian' in the singular (once by name); twice to 'the canons of Nutley serving at Caversham', and once to 'the Prior of Caversham'.<sup>53</sup> There was certainly never a proper Priory at Caversham, but there may, at least for a time, have been a cell which was accorded that courtesy title. If that was so, then the memory of the site may have been preserved in the building which still appeared with that name on the six-inch ordnance survey map, about a quarter of a mile north east of the north end of the bridge. Such a location would be consistent with most of the scrappy evidence which has survived. William Marshal's fishpond could have been situated east of the bridge, and Walter de Hyde's 9 acres 'between the green and the road to Wallingford' would have been west of the chapel and north of the village centre. Also, if the chapel had been on the fringe of the village, or outside it, London might have had some justification for describing it as 'lying wildly'. On the other hand, such a situation makes it hard to see why a boat was necessary, as late as 1239, to bring pilgrims to the shrine when the bridge had been built in roughly its present position between 1200 and 1219.<sup>54</sup> Responsibility for maintaining the bridge was divided between the abbeys of Reading and Nutley, so it seems unlikely that the pilgrims would have been driven by tolls to seek an alternative. Nevertheless a ferry of some kind was still functioning in the sixteenth century, and a 'ferry and ferry barge' were included in the particulars of Francis Knollys' lease of the manor in 1542.<sup>55</sup> If the shrine had lain close to the river upstream of the bridge, a ferry would have been more convenient and direct, but that does not fit any other description. It is possible that the ferry crossed downstream of the eyot, which would have been closer

<sup>51</sup> *Cal. Pat. Eliz.*, vol. I. p.283.

<sup>52</sup> *Ch.Ch.*, Nutley roll, 3, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Close Rolls*, 1242-1247, p.393.

<sup>54</sup> *Close Rolls*, 1237-1242, p.108.

<sup>55</sup> *Letters and papers*, vol. XVII, p.636.

to Reading, that it long ante-dated the bridge, and continued in use out of immemorial custom and marginal convenience. At least it would have been no more difficult to get to 'the Priory' by that route than across the bridge.

Our Lady of Caversham was clearly a shrine of some significance during its brief heyday in the thirteenth century, when Henry III, the Marshal Earls of Pembroke and the de Clare Earls of Hertford made most of its major benefactions. It was also in 1224, according to the Annals of Margam, that the only recorded miracle there took place. Three men who had been drowned in the Medway near Rochester were brought 'to the church of the Blessed Mary of Caversham, where by the merits of the same Virgin they were revived from death'.<sup>56</sup> At first sight it seems impressive that this story should have travelled to far-away Wales; but Richard Marshal, William's second son, who had been born and reared at Caversham, had taken refuge at Margam while in rebellion against the king and had no doubt brought the edifying tale with him. In every other way the annals of the English church are completely silent. The origin and establishment of the cult before 1162, and its fortunes during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be the subject of nothing more substantial than speculation. To judge from the bric-a-brac of crutches, shrouds and wax images which London found, it was mainly physical healing that pilgrims sought at Caversham, and often found to their own satisfaction. Such healing shrines fluctuated in their popularity, and Caversham suffered from changes in curative fashion. Royal and aristocratic visitors were few and far between by the sixteenth century, and the devotion of the local people, however strong, was inarticulate and illiterate. Queen Elizabeth's offering in 1502 was made in the context of a 27 day tour of 16 shrines, during which £2 8s. 4d. was dispensed. Five offerings were larger than Caversham (the largest being 6s. 8d. at Walsingham) five the same and five less. In spite of the general tendency noted by Finucane for shrines of the Virgin to maintain or improve their status in the last century before the reformation,<sup>57</sup> Caversham was clearly a long way down the list, even for so energetic a pilgrim as Elizabeth. Unlike Walsingham, or Hales, or St. Thomas of Canterbury, Caversham did not have a national or political significance in the 1530s, and its suppression was a low key event, however great the distress which may have been caused to those most directly involved. Perhaps the historical importance of the shrine should be expressed in a rather different way. It must have been typical of many such manifestations of the faith of the medieval church, in that it prospered when great men and women were interested in it, and languished when they were not. The devotion of the poor may have been real enough, but it showed remarkably little stamina in the face of official discouragement.

When Caley, Ellis and Bandinel produced their edition of Dugdale's *Monasticon* in 1819, they recorded under 'Caversham Cell',

'After long search the editors of these volumes can make no addition to Bishop Tanner's account of Caversham. He says "The church here was part of the first endowment of the Abbey of Nottesley in Buckinghamshire, A.D. 1162, and afterward the manor and a good estate coming to them here seems to have been a cell to that Monastery, which was enriched by the offerings in the Chapel of Our Lady here"

. . . .<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> 'M CC XXIII Circa hoc etiam tempus in Aqua qua dicitur Medweya iuxta Rouscestram tres viri submersi sunt. Qui post tres dies inventi sunt exanimis ac inde ad Ecclesiam beate Marie de Kaversham delati ibique meritis eisdem virginis a morte sunt resuscitati.' Trinity College, Cambridge, MS o.2.4.

<sup>57</sup> R.C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrimages: popular beliefs in Medieval England* (1977) pp.196-202; *Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York*, p.3.

<sup>58</sup> Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel (London, 1819), vol. VI, p.579.

Martin Gillett did much better. His researches have brought to light a surprising amount, and enabled us to put together at least a patchy account of the shrine in its best days. He has also, however, perhaps unwittingly, highlighted the dependence of shrines on the whims of benefactors and fashions among pilgrims, and the vulnerability of popular devotions to the pressures of the Reformation period. Looking at the thirteenth century evidence it is hard to believe that such a place could have vanished almost overnight, and left behind no memory for even the most diligent antiquarian to identify.