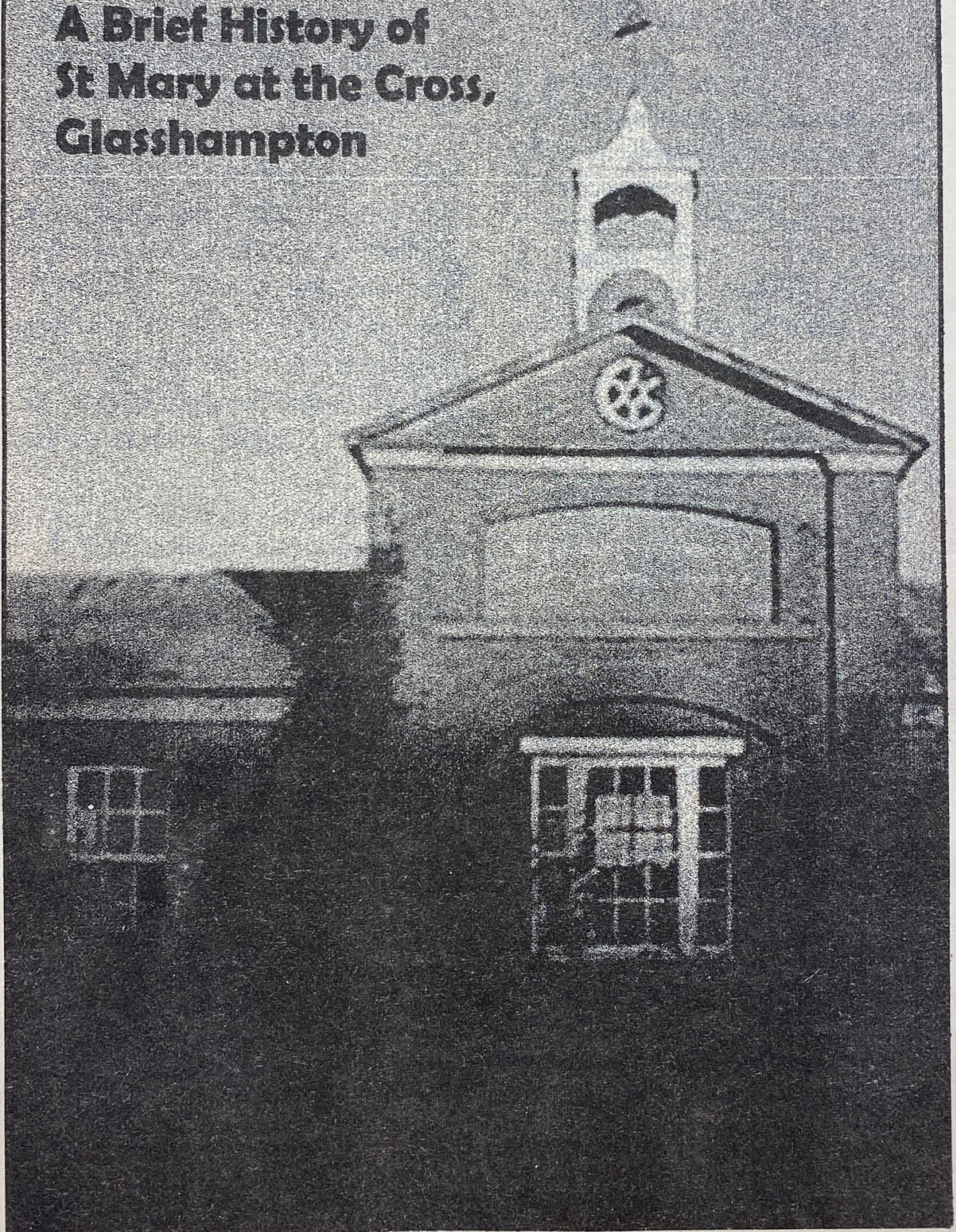


Of Manors and Monasteries

**A Brief History of
St Mary at the Cross,
Glasshampton**



Of Manors and Monasteries

The fact that you're reading this suggests that you have survived the trip up the long and 'more-than-a-little-bumpy' track to Glasshampton (and hopefully the same can be said about your car!). Some things, it is true, do not improve with age, and today even a horse and carriage would be hard-pressed to reach the lull before falling apart at the wheels.

This beautiful, out-of-the-way hill, with its air of peace and prayer by the presence of the monastery seems hardly likely to be the place that has held in its scenic centuries the hopes and dreams, and the tragedy, of a millennium's generations. It is part of life's great tragi-comical nature that men and women will "strut and fret their hour upon the stage and then be heard no more", and to find out just who those 'strutters' and 'fretters' were at Glasshampton has proved at times to be quite a frustrating task. But not entirely. It's possible to trace something of the lives that

have walked this ground (with some unusual discoveries), and of the unlikely event of a stable-block being turned into a monastery!

Wulfmer & Drogo

Believe it or not, there were people living at Glasshampton before the dreaded Domesday Book of land taxes was written in 1089. It was held by Wulfmer (possibly of Danish descent), for whom Domesday was indeed what it claimed to be: a day of doom.



The king dispossessed him of his property and gave it instead to Drogo Son of Pontz, a Herefordshire Norman.

It is unclear whether the original manor house of Glasshampton already existed at this point, or if it was built by Drogo. It is likely that the house was built (or enlarged) at this time, as the stone from the mansion is said to have resembled the Norman-style stone used in

building Astley Church in around 1102. At the time of Wulfmer's dispossession, Glasshampton had a mill. This is interesting because Glasshampton gets its name from a stream - *Glese* - the Anglo-Saxon for 'bright' or 'clear'. Whether this refers to Dick Brook, or to the smaller stream that runs through The Warren (the wood behind the monastery), or even to the little stream that flows into the ponds on the lower south side, it is not certain. But there is no trace of a mill here after 900 years! And equally, there is no trace of the house. After double-destruction by fire there is not so much as a brick left standing to point to the fact that it existed at all. However, the farmer who now owns the fields surrounding the monastery has produced a colourful display of rubble during his ploughing, and so it is fairly certain that the manor house was situated in the centre of the big field to the south of the monastery. But we are jumping ahead of ourselves.

Nunnery & Priory

It would almost be a very literal joke to say that God has had an interest in Glasshampton since time immemorial! It to be somehow destined as a place for the religious life, having become a Nunnery for

some 250 years.

Apparently Drogo's descendants didn't hold Glasshampton for very long. In the 13th century it was held by the Actons (of Acton Hall in Ombersley), and in 1290 Mary Acton "granted to Westwood Nunnery an annual rent of 42 shillings. The size of the mansion can be gauged by the fact that in those days 42/- was a substantial amount of money, and one wonders at the means these nuns had at their disposal to pay for it. These were times when religious held a great deal of the wealth of the country, and when there were many vocations to the religious life (for right or wrong motives).

At that time there was a fairly large Priory in Astley a Benedictine house belonging to a parent monastery in Normandy. Only the Prior's Well remains near the entrance to the churchyard - presumably the "fountain" in the Prior's garden from which the Vicar was allowed to fetch water. We do also know that the monks would come over to Glasshampton to fish in the ponds (and hopefully not for any other reasons!) The lives of both Nunnery and the Priory came to a dramatic and complete end with the Dissolution of Monasteries passed by King

Henry VIII, and we can only imagine the heartbroken nuns being evicted from Glasshampton to go and find a livelihood in the world. Since the Nunnery had gradually come into possession of some of the land over time, it was necessary for the Actons to buy it back from the Crown and for the next 150 years, the story of Glasshampton becomes a bit confusing. It seems that Henry VIII was not the only one in need of a son to carry his name and inheritance at this time. In fact Glasshampton has some very sad stories to tell about lineage. It passed to two new family names (Blount and Winford) through the marriage of daughters, the lineage of whom became extinct when three sons all died without children. And just to keep up with form, the mansion was then given as a gift to another family (Geers) who bore two daughters, both of whom died without children - the line becoming extinct once again.

Flames & Ashes

Fire, however, was set to be the destruction of Glasshampton, and not lineage. It must have been a constant threat to the old buildings of England. In 1666 London had well-near disappeared in flames,



*the Madonna
in the garden.*

and in 1700 it was the turn of Glasshampton.

At the time, the estate was in possession of the Winfords (who were particularly rich, and already owned most of Astley). The house must have been completely destroyed, as the remaining stones were thrown aside and used centuries later on another local site), and a new manor house rose up out of the ashes - in period style, and probably bigger and more impressive than the previous one. Below the chancel step in Astley Church is a stone to "John Watson. Architect of Glasshampton, 26th

October 1707" who apparently died while still completing the signs for the new mansion. That puts its completion probably within 5 to 10 years of that date. It used to be said of the house that it had as many windows in it as days in the year, as many doors as weeks, and as many chimneys as months - and a bit of exaggeration never did anyone any harm! There is fortunately one picture of house that survives - an engraving in Nash's *Worcestershire* - which shows it to be a large rectangular house, approached by a tree-lined road. (Speculation at the monastery has concluded that this is probably the straight section of the track before you reach the hill, and that fits with where the house was - if you continued straight instead of curving around the cemented bit.)

Handel & Horticulture

Sadly, the house was only to stand for 100 years before its definitive end. But there is one other very interesting period to tell about before its destruction. Who would have thought that there had been a laboratory at Glasshampton and that it had been a place for botanical research; that it had seen the pursuit of archery as a sport, and the home of authoritative writing on the subject; or that it had

witnessed in its rooms the composing of music for violin, violin and organ recitals; choir meetings, and annual concerts where it was not uncommon to see some of the well-known singers of England, and that posterity should remember the "unforgettable effect of Handel's choruses in the noble hall at Glasshampton". These events happened towards the end of the century, when the house had been leased for about 30 years to Walter M. Moseley and his family. When all 3 of Sir Thomas Cookes-Winford's sons had died before him in 1744, he was left with no heir, and gave Glasshampton as a gift to Thomas Geers (who took the name Winford). But alas. Thomas didn't live for more than 10 years after the old man died, and so the house came to be leased to tenants for the latter part of the century - of whom W.M. Moseley was the longest most significant.

Wealth & Grandeur

Nash's engraving of the mansion was not subtitled correctly, because it never belonged to Sambrooke Freeman, who, apparently was engaged to marry one of Thomas Geers' daughters, and had come out to look at the house on her behalf. We do not know what happened to him, but

the daughter, who appears to have remained a spinster, came and lived at Glasshampton for the last few years of her old age - and stayed alone in the big house. She had no heirs, and left the whole estate to Rev. Denham J. J. Cookes, the rector of Astley Church - who no doubt could not believe his good fortune. Rev. Cookes was a very wealthy man, and set about immediately to enlarge and restore the house. And...to build a stunning stable block for it. It is quite probable that the ground we are now standing on was a stable for a long time prior to the existence of this building. But to consider the original purpose of a building such as this can only be described as "grand", and perhaps a little over-the-top! The fluted brickwork above the windows and doors is of a very specialised art, and has more recently attracted experts to come and examine it.

Horses & Clocks

If you would like to have some idea of what it must have looked like in use as a stable, we can pause for a minute in the telling of the story. The carriage entrance was from the front, through huge gates in the central tower (the clock tower) which is now built in. Horses were housed in the section

that is flow the Chapel, and the carriages and carts probably on the opposite side where the dining room and library now are. Apparently there were living quarters for servants and farmhands in the block as well, and that would have been in what is now the Guest Wing. The building was probably finished in 1809 - all except the clock tower, which presents a bit of a mystery. The clock is an intricate antique made by Samuel Thorpe, and is one of a set of two. (The other one is on the Stourport canal basin.) The mystery: it was made in 1813 — three years after the house had burned down. Possibly Rev. Cookes had ordered it while the stables were being built — and of course that wasn't an age of instant supply on demand, especially for a mechanical, handmade instrument such as the clock is. No doubt he had paid for it, and when it was ready was installed on the stable even though there was no house and no one living there.

Although the clock itself keeps time, it is unable to make the 4 clock faces do the same, and they have been disconnected. The clock was removed for a long period because the wood had rotted. It was re-installed in 1975.

Fire & Destruction

But now let us finish the chapter in the life of the manor house. Rev. Cookes renovated and restored and enlarged the house, and by the spring of 1810 the work was virtually complete. On the evening of April 1810 he invited all workmen to a huge dinner party to celebrate the completion. The story is told that one of the workmen, in a drunken stupor after the party, dropped his pipe amongst woodshavings that had not been cleared away. For a while it smouldered, but once the fire had begun there was no stopping it and the mansion was in a blaze before any help could arrive. From its elevated position on the hill, it apparently lit up the sky like a torch and could be seen for miles around. Frantic efforts were made to rescue the contents of the house, but without very much success. One of the few

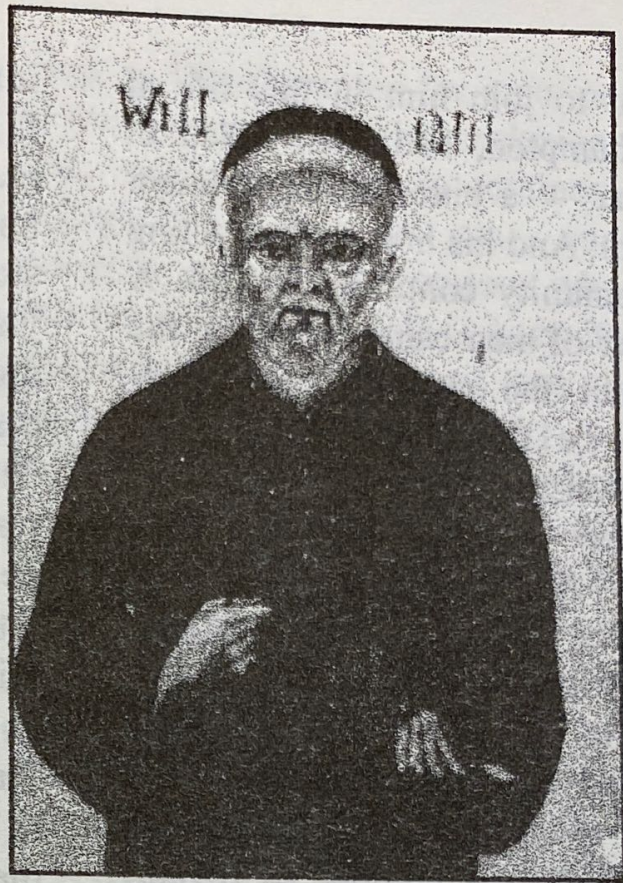


items saved from the flames was the beautiful organ, which was subsequently sold to St. Nicholas' Church in Worcester

The destruction was complete, and the manor house was not to be rebuilt. Rev. Cookes retired to Teignmouth, and frequently heard to remark: "It was a judgement on me. The Lord knew I could not have kept such a place going." He died in 1829 leaving 3 sons as owners of the property, but it passed to the Jones family when all three of died without heirs (a constant chronicle of Glasshampton!). However there was no one living on the property now that the manor house had disappeared.

There are a few other relics that survive the manor besides the stable. To the south of the monastery, and a little higher on the hill, is a square area enclosed by a very high redbrick wall. This was the manor's kitchen garden, now used for other purposes by tenants who live in the cottage which was built near to it. Just in front of the south-facing part of this enclosure is what looks like a ditch. It's actual name is a 'ha-ha' — a deep furrow that would have run around the entire manor house to stop sheep and other animals from walking into the garden to graze,

and preventing the necessity of building a wall and blocking out the view. (We do know, however, that part of the main garden was walled, as some of the wall still survived at the turn of the century [1900].) One other very interesting remainder is the icehouse. This is situated in The Warren, north-west of the monastery. There are only about 200 icehouses still in Britain, and this one is in excellent condition. It has a 17ft-deep chamber approached by a small corridor, and the brickwork dates to about 1750. It is on the edge of what used to be a small dam from which ice would be harvested in the winter and kept well into summer. The remains of the dam wall can also be seen.



Icon of Fr William, painted by a brother

The century after the house burned down must have been the quietest that Glasshampton has known, and there is not much that we know about it. The stables fell into disrepair, and besides being inhabited by bats and owls, a gamekeeper had lived there for some time in the early 1900s — until it had been considered unfit for human habitation. A new chapter in its life was to begin with the coming of Father William Sirr in 1918 — known to posterity as William of Glasshampton. Father William was part of the Society of

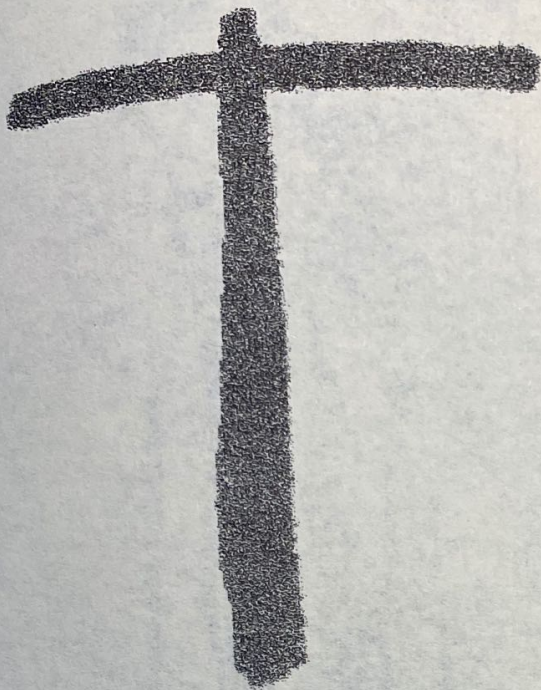
Divine Compassion (SDC) and for a time had been its Superior. Deeper stirrings within him to a more enclosed and contemplative monastic lifestyle had prompted him to ask for release from the Society. He hoped to attract some men to join him, returning as they were from the war (WWI), and to live out an ascetic and secluded life of prayer. It was providential when Mr. Jones offered him the stables as a possible place for his monastery in 1918. He moved to Glasshampton towards the end of that same year, and set about to make it habitable again. A young friend, who would have been

certain to join him in this life at Glasshampton, had been killed in the war — a bitter disappointment for him. And his hopes of attracting a community continued to fail. A number of men came to try out the life, but the rigorous spirituality and self-discipline that characterised Father William was not easy to live by, and none stayed. Apparently the diet was atrocious, on top of that, and there was little or no heating in the building. So Father William remained a solitary. Besides his efforts to restore the building, he ministered to a number of people who came to speak to him at various times, including, in later days, priests who had been in trouble. He died in 1937, and special permission was obtained for him to be buried on the premises. His grave is in the garth of the monastery.

Founder & Exemplar

Father William's life at Glasshampton is more than just those living years. He was a profound man of prayer, and that has somehow left an important mark on the place. A few people are known to have had some unusually spiritual experiences in the monastery chapel, and many have commented that they perceive

it as a place of the presence of God. Is this associated with that holy man? On a different kind of level, one of the present brothers tells the story - and swears that it is true - that he walked into the chapel one morning and there saw William on his knees in the narthex of the chapel. Only after the brother had walked out again did he realise who he had seen, at which time he returned to find no one there. Well this is not intended to propagate ghost stories, but it does give food for thought about our indebtedness to Father William — not only as the founder of a monastery in this building, but as an exemplary and holy ancestor of the monastic life in this place. Father William died on the eve of yet another war, and shortly after World War II had begun some Sisters from a community at Haywards Heath came to stay at Glasshampton with some elderly ladies they were caring for. The monastery was now in the hands of trustees, and it was hoped that another community in the Anglican Church would take an interest in it and continue its purpose as a religious house. This happened after the war, when, in 1946, the Society of St. Francis took occupancy of it — in a caretaker capacity.



Prayer & Quiet

The Society of St. Francis is not monastic (i.e. its members do not take vows of stability as would be the case in a Benedictine monastery, for instance, and neither are they an enclosed community). Rather, in the spirit of St. Francis, ministry and care of the poor and needy is an important aspect of their life. Nevertheless it was felt that a house set aside for prayer and quiet would make a distinctive contribution to the life of the Society as a whole. And this it seems to have achieved over more than 50 years. Hundreds of brothers have lived on this hill for a time (though not at the same time!). After spending an initial time in a larger Friary, the novices of the Society

come to Glasshampton for a period of formation and relative seclusion. This means that there is continual change from year to year, and possibly is one of the reasons why this house has been able to keep its essential life and relevance over so many years.

Since a major part of this story has revolved around the burning down of buildings, let it be said that this building has been close at times to following the path of its forbears. There are 3 instances of fire that we know about over the two decades: a welder who accidentally welded an aerosol can, which promptly exploded into flames and set fire to the room; a candle-making exploit that went awry with less dramatic, but equally serious, consequences; and finally arson — a not-too-stable guest who took it upon himself to construct a fire in his room. Anyone particularly interested to see Brother Fire in action would be welcome to go and see him in the hearth!

Bigger & Deeper

Soon, perhaps, it will be time to return down the bumpy track to the place where you are part of the living and character of what makes a place and a home.

There is always much more to a place than the space that it occupies! Possibly this story has shown something of how that is true, and may lead you to reflect on the importance of place, of home, of history, in your own context. But if this particular story has been interesting to you, then you will realise that your stay here is part of something deeper and bigger than just the time that is spent here. In a sense you share a "communion" with all of those whose lives have breathed this air, and beheld these beautiful views, and sensed the peace of the place. And you have only to look at the Visitors Book to realise that there are many more lives involved than has been mentioned in this story! So it is a fitting way to conclude by saying thank-you to you for, in your own small way, being part of the rich tapestry that is life at Glasshampton!



*Compiled and written
by a friend of the monastery.
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The Clock Tower from the Garth, October 2002

