



The Surrender of Battle Abbey 1538

This was such an important event for Battle that the various letters and documents that relate to this event and the site's final acquisition by Sir Anthony Browne are reproduced below. These are copied from the work of J. Vidler who himself borrowed from Willis. The originals (mostly in Latin) are held in the National Archives.

The act for dissolving the great monasteries was passed in 1537-8 (years at that time dated from 25th March in one of our calendar years to 24th March the following year). Below is the instruction from King Henry VIII to the dissolution commissioners to proceed to Battle. It would have been in Latin and dated sometime after February 1538, when the commissioners were sent out

The letter Patent to the commissioners, Gage and Layton.

"Henry the Eighth &c.

To our Trusty &c. For as much as we understand that the monastery of Battell, is at this present in such state as the same is neither used to the glory of God, nor to the benefit of our common wealth. We let you wit, that therefore being minded to take the same into our own hands for a better purpose, like as we doubt not the head of the same will be contented to make his surrender accordingly ; We for the special trust and confidence that we have in your fidelity, wisdoms, and discretions have, and by these presents do authorize, name, assign and appoint you, that immediately repairing to the said house, ye shall receive of the said head, such a writing under the convent seal, as to your discretions shall seem requisite, meet and convenient, for the due surrender to our use of the same, and thereupon take possession thereof, and of all the goods, catties, plate, jewels, implements, and stuff, being within or appertaining thereunto. And further causing all the goods and implements to be indifferently sold, either for ready money, or days upon sufficient sureties, so that the same pass not one year and a half, ye shall deliver to the said head and brethren, such part of the said money and goods, as ye by your discretions shall think meet and convenient for their dispatch, and further, to see them have convenient pensions by your wisdoms assigned accordingly, which done, and moreover seeing the rightful and due debts thereof paid and satisfied, as well of the revenues as of the said stuff, as to reason and good conscience appertaineth, and your charges reasonably allowed, ye shall proceed to the dissolution of the said house, and further, in your name take possession of the same, to be kept for our use and profit. Ye shall furthermore bring and convey to our tower of London, after your said discretions all the rest of the said money, plate, jewels and ornaments, that in any wise shall come to your hands by means of the premises, or any part thereof, straightly charging all mayors, sheriffs, bailiffs, constables, and all other our officers, ministers and subjects, to whom in this case it shall appertain, that unto you and every of

you in execution hereof, they be helping, aiding, favouring and assisting, as they shall answer unto us to the contrary, at their uttermost perils, &c.
Given &c."

The commissioners Sir John Gage and Layton, arrived at Battle, towards the end of May, 1538.

The following is a translation from the Latin of the actual deed of surrender. Dated 27 May 1538. Reading the above this was clearly a surrender that could not be refused.

"To all the faithful in Christ, to whom the present writing shall come, John, abbot of the monastery of Battell, in the county of Sussex, otherwise called John, abbot of the monastery of St. Martin, of Battell, in the county of Sussex, otherwise called John, abbot of the monastery of Battell, in the county of Sussex, of the order of St. Benedict, and the convent of the same place, health everlasting in the Lord : know ye that we, the aforesaid abbot and convent, with our unanimous assent and consent, deliberate minds, certain knowledge, and mere motion, for certain just and reasonable causes, us, our minds and consciences especially moving, have freely and spontaneously given, granted, and by these presents do give, grant, render, and confirm, to our most illustrious prince and lord, Henry the VIIIth, by the grace of God, of England and France king, defender of the faith, lord of Ireland, and on earth supreme head, all that our monastery or abbey of Battell aforesaid ; and also, all and singular manors, lordships, messuages, gardens, curtilages, tofts, lands, and tenements, meadows, feedings, pastures, woods, rents, reversions, services, mills, passages, knights-fees, wards, marriages, bond-men, villains, with their sequelcommons, liberties, franchises, jurisdictions, offices, courts-leet, hundreds, views of frankpledge, fairs, markets, parks, warrens, vivares, waters, fisheries, ways, passages, void grounds, advowsons, nominations, presentations, and donations of churches, vicarages, chapels, chantries, hospitals, and other ecclesiastical benefices whatsoever, rectories, vicarages, chapels, chantries, pensions, portions, annuities, tithes oblations, and all and singular our emoluments, profits, possessions, hereditaments, and rights whatsoever, as well within the said county of Sussex, as within the counties of Kent, Southampton, Devon, Worcester, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Berks, Oxford, Wilts, Cambridge, as elsewhere within the kingdom of England, Wales and the marches thereof, to the said monastery or abbey of Battell aforesaid, in any wise belonging, appendant, or incumbent ; and all manner, deeds, evidences, writings, muniments in any wise concerning or belonging to the said monastery, manors, lands, tenements, and other the premises, with the appurtenances ; or to any parcel thereof, to have, hold and enjoy the said monastery or abbey, site, grounds, circuit, and precinct of Battell aforesaid ; and, also all and singular lordships, manors, messuages, lands, tenements, rectories, pensions, and other the premises, with all and singular their appurtenances, to our aforesaid most invincible prince and lord the king, his heirs and assigns for ever. To whom, in order to give all the effect of right which can or may thereupon come, we do in this behalf (as is meet) subject and submit ourselves and the said monastery or abbey of Battell aforesaid, and all rights to us, in any wise acquired, giving and granting, to the same

royal majesty, his heirs and assigns, all and all manner of full and free faculty, authority and power of disposing of us, and the said monastery of Battell aforesaid, together with all and singular manors, lands, tenements, rents, reversions, services, and every the premises, with their rights and appurtenances whatsoever; and of alienating, giving, converting, and transferring, at his free-will and royal pleasure, to whatsoever uses pleasing to his majesty, ratifying, and by these presents we do promise to ratify, and for ever to confirm such dispositions, alienations, donations, conversions, and translations, to be henceforth by his majesty in any wise made. And, that all and singular the premises may have their due effect, the elections, moreover, to us and to our successors ; and also all plaints, provocations, appeals, actions, suits, and instances, and all other our remedies and benefits whatsoever, in any wise competent, and hereafter to be competent to us, perhaps, and to our successors in this behalf, by force of the disposition, alienation, translation, and conversion aforesaid, and other the premises. And all exceptions, objections, and allegations of deceit, error, fear, ignorance, or other matter or disposition, being wholly set aside and removed, we have openly, publicly and expressly, and of our certain knowledge, and voluntary inclinations, renounced and yielded up, and by these presents we do renounce and yield up, and from the same do recede in these writings. And we, the aforesaid abbot and convent, and our successors, will warrant the said monastery or abbey, precinct, site, mansion and church of Battell, aforesaid, and all and singular the manors, lordships, messuages, gardens, curtilages, tofts, meadows, feedings, pastures, woods, underwoods, lands, tenements, and all and singular other the premises, with every their appurtenances to our aforesaid lord the king, his heirs, and assigns, against all men for ever, by these presents. In witness whereof we the aforesaid abbot and convent have caused our common seal to be affixed to this writing,

dated the 27th day of the month of May, in the thirtieth year of the reign of our illustrious lord the king."

John, abbot of Battell
Richard Salehurst, prior
Clement Westfeld
John Henfeld
John Hastings, sub prior
Thomas Levett
Vincent Dunston
John Benyng
Clement Gregory
Thomas Cuthbert
William Ambrose
Thomas Bede
John Jerome
Edward Clement
Bartholomew Ciprian
John Newton
Richard Tony

The seals

The seals affixed to the deed of surrender bear two impressions. The obverse of red wax represents a large and handsome church, or, according to some opinions, gateway, with a tower and four turrets, within a border in which is the legend, " SIGILLVM CONVENTVS SANCTI MARTINI DE BELLO."



The reverse of white wax has the abbot's seal, which represents a gothic canopy, ornamented with the history of St. Martin, dividing his cloak with the naked beggar. Under the canopy is the figure of a mitred abbot, having his crozier in the right hand, in the other a book: in each of the side compartments is a figure ; one a bishop, the other a female with an olive branch, emblematical of peace; beneath the figures are two shields ; that on the right bearing England and France, quarterly ; that on the left, the arms of the abbot. Gules, a Cross, Or, between four Crowns, Or. Around the whole the legend "Sigil : Johes : dei : gra : de Bello."



The following letter from the commissioners to lord Cromwell, preserved among the Cottonian Manuscripts. gives us reason to believe that the abbot and monks had prepared themselves for the dissolution of their monastery, by disposing of their most valuable moveable property ; for it cannot be supposed that so rich an abbey was badly provided, after more than four centuries of uninterrupted prosperity, and continually increasing wealth. The accounts of the abbot himself when sacristan shew that new vestments, plate, and other articles were then purchased.

Letter dated 27th May 1538 from the commissioners to Thomas Cromwell. This was in English and the spelling is maintained as was.

" My Lord,

This shal be to advertise yor Lordshippe, that we haue taken the assurance for the kyng, and haue caste or bowke for the dispache of the monks and household, which amownttithe at the leaste to a 2 hundrethe pownds : the implements off the household be the worste that evr I see in Abbaye or Priorie, the vestyments so old and so baysse worn, raggede and torne as your Lordeshipe would not thinke, so that very small money can be made of the vestrye ; if your Lordshippe send us a hundrethe pownds by the bringer we shal make up the reste if hit be possible of the old vestrye stuffe ; if we cannot, we shal disburse y* till or retorne to yr Lordeshipp. The church plate and plate of the household, we suppose by estimation will amount to cccc marks or more: there is no great store of catell; this day we be making an inventorie.

Thus or Lord continewe yowe in honour.

From Battell Abbay, the 27th of May.

Yor Lordshippes to command,

JOHN GAGE

Yor Lordshippes most humble to command,

RICHARD LAYTON PREST."

The next document dated 6th July 1538 refers to the pensions given to the Abbot, the monks and permanent employees of the Abbey¹. Information in this document shows that:- The Abbot, by letters patent, dated the 6th of July following, was granted out of the revenues of the monastery, a pension of 100 marks, or £66 13s. 4d.

The sixteen monks who signed the surrender, also had pensions:

Richard Salehurst 15 marks or, £10;

Westfeld, Henfeld, Hastings, Levett, Dunstan, Benyng, Gregory, Ambrose, and Bede 10 marks, or 6 13s. 4d. each;

Cuthbert, Jerome, Clement, Ciprian and Dertmouthe, 9 marks, or £6 each.

Willis says that he found no pension assigned to Tony except he 'be the same with Richard Ladde a novice, whose name is put separate in the Pension Book', in a distinct place after the rest. If so his allowance was only 4 marks (£2 13s 4d).

A later document dated 1553 shows that pensions were also paid to lay employees of the Abbey - "There remained in charge £26 6s. 4d. in Annuities payable out of the revenues of this convent, besides the ...pensions to ex-monks."

There is also a record in 'Monasticon' that the clerics at the Priory of Brecknock (a cell of Battle) were also pensioned off for the total sum of £29 3s 0d.

Willis in his short account of this abbey and its privileges, says, concerning the destruction.

All which privileges with the Abbey itself coming into King Henry VIIIth's hands at the Dissolution, he soon after, as I was informed when I was at the Place, bestowed the Site of the Church with several of the Lands upon one Gilmer, who for lucre of the Lead, Timber, &c., in a little time pulled it down and sold the materials; which sacriligious Act thrived not ; for it was soon after sold to Sir Anthony Browne. The church and some other portions of the abbey were destroyed by the authority of the Commissioners, as was the case with many others, and it is probable that Gilmer was the person employed by them to effect the demolition; or he may have given for the materials of the parts to be destroyed, a certain sum, either in "reddy mony or Days upon sufficient Suretyes," and undertaken the demolition at his own cost; in which case he of course, sold the materials to remunerate his outlay.

The portions of the abbey destroyed immediately after the dissolution were the church; the campanile, or bell-tower; the sacristy; the chapter house, which stood on the south side of the choir ; the cloisters ; and perhaps some buildings at the south-east angle of the refectory, and the superstructure of the vaults now remaining : though the latter may have been taken down by Sir Anthony Browne previous to commencing his new buildings which is supposed to have been in 1539.

It is evident from the king's grant to Sir Anthony Browne, within three months after the surrender, that Gilmer never had any part of the place given to him.

The letters patent of Henry the VIIIth, dated August the 18th, 1538, granted Battel Abbey, and various of its possessions to Sir Anthony Browne, by the description of

"The site of the late Monastery or Abbey of Battell, in the county of Sussex, then dissolved ; and all the Church, Bell-Tower, and Church-Yard of the said Monastery or Abbey ; also all messuages, edifices, granges, stables, dove-houses, lands, &c., within or adjoining to the site, circuit, or precinct of the same. And one house called the Lodge ; and one garden, and one water-mill called the Park Milne, one lentin called the Tyle-House, and three acres of pasture to the same belonging, in Battell ; also the Great Park, in circuit two miles and a half, and containing by estimation three hundred acres of land, in Battell aforesaid ; and the Little Park, in circuit one mile and a half, and containing by estimation one hundred acres of land ; and also three fields of pasture called Lydbroke, otherwise Sextry, containing by estimation twenty-six acres ; five fields of pasture called Spytel Land, containing twenty-eight acres; one pasture called the Procession Strake ; one small croft of land containing two acres ; one pasture called the Vineyard-Pond, containing seventeen acres ; one pasture called Le Newe

ground, containing twenty acres; the Clay Pits, and one other pasture lying without the Butts, containing twenty acres ; one pasture called the Little Maundsy next the end of the garden, containing fifty acres ; one other pasture called the Maundsy next the Butts, containing five acres; the Hay Park of two acres; Cellarers Bayles and the Broom-field, containing sixty acres ; Bellyngfelde of eleven acres ; the New Ground of twenty acres ; and another field called the New Ground, of twenty-two acres ; also a field called the Wek-mede, otherwise Sextry, of fifty acres; two fields called Bencrofte and Stewe-mede, of six acres ; Culvermede, of four acres ; the Long-mede, of ten acres ; Long-mede, of two acres ; the Pasture-fields, ten acres : Almonry-mede, of three acres and a half; three meadows called Spytel-land-meadows, of fifteen acres ; Horse-pond-mede, of five acres ; Marshallmarsh, of sixty-six acres; and all that messuage, grange, and farm, called Bolsham-Felde, containing twelve acres; Hatham-Felde, oftweleve acres; Rolfe-Felde, of six acres ; Petley, of seven acres ; a small field lying near Cornore, of two acres; Hetheboters, of sixty acres; Welland-Felde, of twelve acres; Shepe-Felde, of nine acres and two rods ; Corneore, of twenty-six acres; Marley Pond, of two acres ; three small crofts lying behind Marley Farm House, containing six acres ; Wellande-Mede of twenty acres; Rowland, containing eighteen acres; Seddlescomb-Mede, of twenty acres ; a meadow lying behind the bam of Marley Farm, of sixteen acres ; Cheese-Crofte-Mede, of eight acres ; Barnehorne Pond, situate in the parish of Howe ; and also ten acres, parcel of the manor of Barnehorne, and lying contiguous to the said pond." " Also all, and all manner of tenths whatsoever of all and singular the said premises ; and all tenths of grain and standing corn in the parish or town of Battell. "All and singular which premises above mentioned, are lying and being in Battell, Marley, and Howe, in the county of Sussex ; and belong to the said late Monastery."" Also all the lordship and manor of Battell, with its members and appurtenances, belonging to the said late Monastery ; and the Rectory, advowson, donation, presentation, and right of patronage of Battell ; and all advowsons, &c., of the Vicarage of the parish of Battell ; together with all and singular, messuages, lands, &c., in Battell, Marley, Seddlescombe, Watlyngton, Hertsmonceux, Warkling, Cattesfelde, Tellham,, Ukeham, Swynham, Willingdon, Westdene, Hollyngton, Bexle, Bodyham, and Angmereherst, in the county of Sussex, and in Romney Marsh in the county of Kent, belonging to the said late Monastery ; as fully as they were held by John Hamond, late abbot of the said late Monastery, or any of his predecessors abbots of the same." " To hold to the said Anthony Browne for ever of the King and his successors, in capite, by the service of two knight's fees, and a yearly rent of twelve pounds, in full of all rents, demands, and services whatsoever, &c., &c."

¹Various books and documents vary between pounds and marks for these pensions. Marks are recorded over the signature of Thomas Cromwell and this would seem definitive. One mark = 13s 4d (67p)

Author/transcriber's note:

These comprehensive documents and other data leave no doubt that every i was dotted and every t crossed in the documentation leaving no loophole to the events. It was indeed an offer the Abbey and its Abbot could not refuse.

East Sussex at that time was very vulnerable to French attacks and the dissolution of Battle Abbey and the seizure of adjoining lands from Brede to as far as Rye from Syon Abbey (the former lands of the Abbaye de Fécamp) to the east of Battle would have left a local power vacuum. It is therefore interesting that Henry VIII gave both sets of lands to Sir Anthony Browne who was his trusted friend and could be relied upon to defend the area.

Robertsbridge Abbey, further inland, and its lands went to Sir William Sidney of Penshurst, Kent

Keith Foord, June 2019

This paper also forms appendix A3.6 to Keith Foord's book 'Conquest to Dissolution 1067-1538' published by BDHS in 2019

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