11. Epilogue

The end of Cowick priory, when it came, was remarkably abrupt. Four months after the deed of surrender had been signed at Tavistock, the king granted almost all the former estates of Tavistock abbey to John, Lord Russell, his principal agent in the west of England. Lord Russell was president of the "Council of the West" established by the king to curb any local opposition to the religious changes of the time. He acquired the manors of Cowick and Exwick, and with them the deserted buildings of Cowick priory, on 4 July 1539.(85)

Within a very short time the priory church and most of the surrounding buildings were demolished. The shrine of St Walter was dismantled; the books and ornaments of the church were probably sold. The bell-tower built in the 1470s had stood for barely sixty years when it was destroyed. On the site of the priory, and perhaps incorporating some parts of the monastic buildings, Lord Russell built the house which still stands at Cowick Barton. It is now an inn, but when first built it was called the "mansion house of Cowick", and was probably intended as an occasional residence for Lord Russell and his family.(86

Cowick Barton house, built on the site of Cowick priory after its dissolution; photographed in 2024

[photograph by Geoffrey Yeo]

The people of St Thomas were by no means all in sympathy with the reformed religion. The vicar, Robert Welshe, refused to accept the new Book of Common Prayer introduced in the spring of 1549, and continued to celebrate mass in St Thomas church in the traditional manner. Later that year he joined the rebels who were besieging Exeter in an attempt to secure the restoration of Catholic practices and ceremonies. For his part in the rebellion he was put to death at the top of the tower of his parish

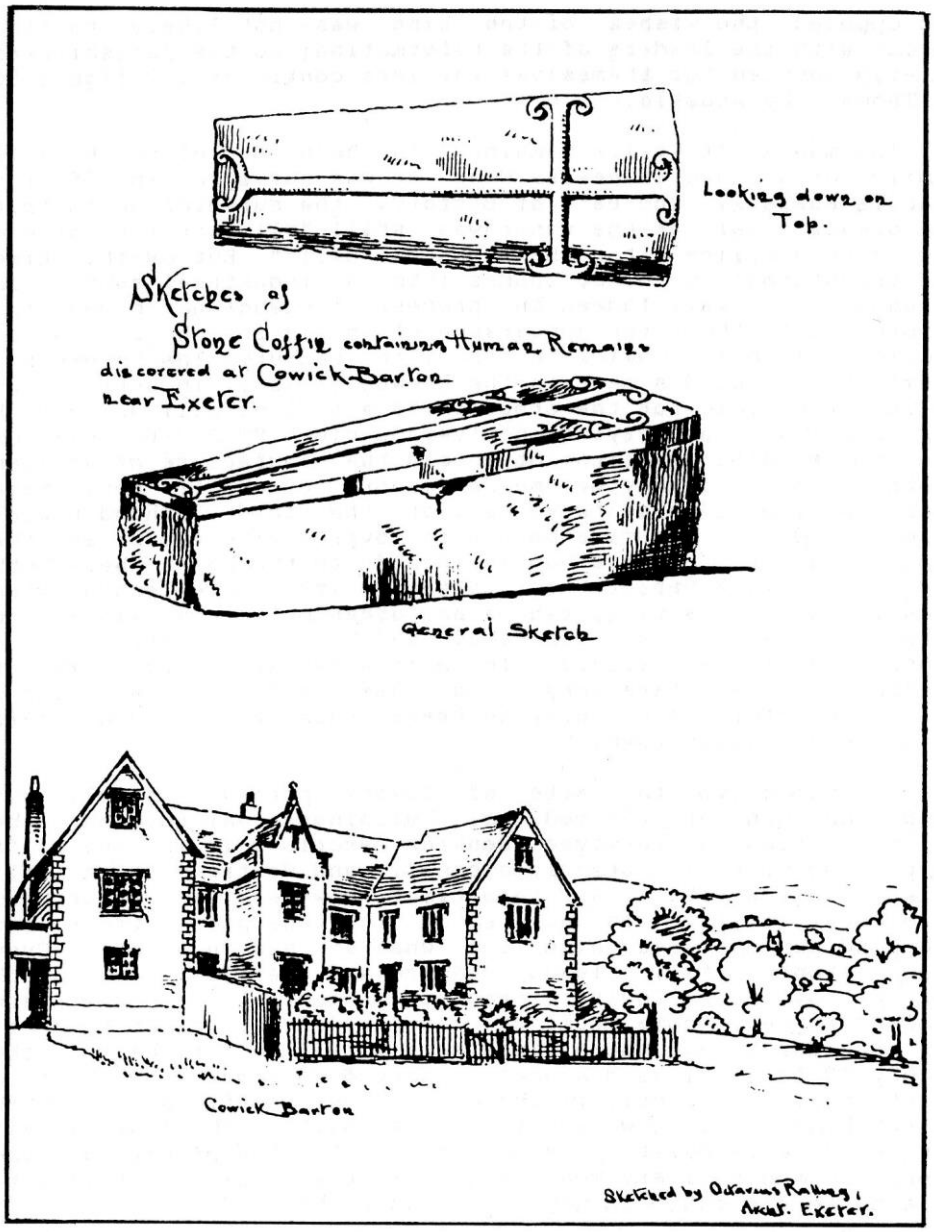
church.[87] Before his execution he was dressed in his vestments, and his body was draped with a holy water bucket, a sacring bell and other symbols of popish religion. The vicar's gruesome fate was intended as a warning to others who might have shared his views; according to tradition his body was left hanging on the gibbet for almost four years.

In the 1550s and 1560s a change of some significance was made to the name of both the church and the parish. The name of St Thomas Becket, the archbishop who in the 12th century had opposed the wishes of the king, was not likely to find favour with the leaders of the Reformation; so the parishioners quietly adopted for themselves the less controversial figure of St Thomas the Apostle.

The manor of Cowick remained in the hands of the Russell family for a hundred years. When it was surveyed in 1560 for Francis Russell, 2nd earl of Bedford, the surveyor noted that the greater part of the manor was still "all most fern ground and furse and lies altogether upon the hills". But by this time the transformation of St Thomas into an industrial suburb was already under way. Indeed the process of change had begun long before, with the first appearance of mils for the fulling of woollen cloth in Cowick in the 13th century. The monks had themselves played a part in the growth of local industry, when in 1480 they paid for the erection of a fulling mill and a rack for stretching and drying newly-made cloth.[88] By the time of the monks' departure from St Thomas the manufacture of woollen cloth may have already become a major source of employment there.

By the 18th century many of the fields behind Cowick Street and near the riverbank were covered with racks; and the population of St Thomas had increased to the point where both sides of Cowick Street, for virtually its whole length, were occupied with houses, workshops and other buildings. Alphington Street too was densely populated, and behind both streets were numerous courts and alleys. "In these streets," wrote Alexander Jenkins in 1806, "are many good houses and large shops; and were it not for its vicinity to Exeter this parish would appear as a large country town."[89]

Meanwhile even the site of Cowick priory was all but forgotten. None of the medieval buildings remained; only the monastic fishpond survived. Jenkins described it in 1806 as "a deep sedgy bottom, formerly a pond", and vestiges of it still existed in the 1880s. At this time, however, the priory was erroneously believed to have stood in Okehampton Street, and the pond was not recognized for what it had once been. Even when a stone coffin, a leaden chalice and the floor of a church were discovered at Cowick Barton in August 1887, they were thought to have come from the cemetery chapel of St Michael. Few considered that these finds were more likely to be from the priory.[90]



(above) Stone coffin, probably 13th or 14th century, from Cowick priory

(below) Cowick Barton house

Sketches made in 1887 by Octavius Ralling

[from *Western Antiquary* 7 (1887)]

Local legend alone preserved a memory of the true location of Cowick priory: the path across the fields to Cowick Barton house was known as the “Monks Walk”; the house itself was said to be built of stone taken from the priory; and the ghost of the solitary monk walked in the fields at twilight, waiting to alarm the unsuspecting passer-by.

(85) G. Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter, 1846), pp.104-8.

(86) *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), p.323.

(87) J. Hoker, *Description of the Citie of Excester*, ed. Harte and others (Exeter, 1919), part 2, pp.91-4.

(88) Devon Record Office [Devon Heritage Centre], W1258M/G4/49/1, survey of 1560; W1258M/G4/13; W1258M/G4/53/4, 19-20 Edw.IV.

(89) A. Jenkins, *History of the City of Exeter* (Exeter, 1806), p.426.

(90) A. Jenkins, *History of the City of Exeter* (Exeter, 1806), p.431; *Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries* 35 (1986), pp.324-5.