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John II, Bishop of Rochester, Did Not Exist

WHAT became of the bishopric of Rochester in the period following the death of Bishop John in June 1137? Did the see remain vacant for the next five years? Or was it occupied, for part of this time, by a bishop who happened to have the same name as his predecessor? These questions have been the subject of desultory discussion among historians since the seventeenth century. Poole, reopening the debate in 1923, argued in favour of the existence of a second Bishop John;¹ Hunt, replying, declined to be convinced.² Saltman, rehearsing the evidence again in 1951, thought he had managed to prove that Poole was right.³ Though Saltman's conclusions were taken for granted by Greenway,⁴ the need for some reconsideration of the problem has been noted most recently by Brett.⁵

It is not my intention to comment in detail on the arguments and counter-arguments developed by modern historians. By and large it seems fair to say that excessive reliance has been placed on doubtful or ambiguous evidence,⁶ while some of the most significant sources have been either overlooked or undervalued. In fact, there are contradictory indications, in the medieval sources from Rochester itself, as far back as the beginning of the thirteenth century. Some tell us explicitly that John II did exist: others imply – necessarily only by silence – that he did not. Thus we cannot hope to discover the truth without also discovering, if we can, how this subsequent confusion might have arisen.

Table 1 gives a summary list of the bishops who occupied the see of Rochester between 1058 and 1226. With the exception of Ralph – who was translated to Canterbury – all these bishops are known to have died

1. R. L. Poole, 'The English Bishops at the Lateran Council of 1139', *ante*, xxxviii (1923), 61–3.

2. W. Hunt, 'The English Bishops at the Lateran Council of 1139', *ibid.* 557–60.

3. A. Saltman, 'John II, Bishop of Rochester', *ante*, lxvi (1951), 71–5.

4. D. Greenway, *John Le Neve: Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae, 1066–1300: Monastic Cathedrals* (London, 1971), p. 76.

5. M. Brett, 'Forgery at Rochester', in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* (Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica, xxxiii, Hanover, 1988), iv. 397–412, at p. 410.

6. As Poole pointed out, Richard of Hexham, *De Gestis Regis Stephani*, ed. R. Howlett (Rolls Series, 1886), p. 176, seems to have been under the impression that the party of English prelates attending the Lateran Council of 1139 included the Bishop of Rochester. But Richard's information was visibly defective to some extent (there is a blank in the manuscript where the name of this bishop should be) and may have been more seriously garbled. As Hunt pointed out in reply, Henry Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *De Contemptu Mundi*, ed. T. Arnold (Rolls Series, 1879), p. 315, seems to have been under the impression that there was only one Bishop John – that the John who succeeded Ernulf and the John who was succeeded by Ascelin were one and the same person. But Henry was moralizing, rather than writing history, and perhaps he was not being careful with the facts. In short, either Richard or Henry is an unreliable witness; but I doubt whether it would be possible to judge between them in abstraction from the Rochester evidence.

Table 1
Bishops of Rochester, 1058–1226

Siward	1058	1072×5	14 October
Ernost	1076×7	1077	16 July
Gundulf	1077	1108	10 March
Ralph	1108	1114	20 October
Ernulf	1115	1124	15 March
John	1125	1137	21 June
?			
Ascelin	1142×3	1148	23 January
Walter	1148	1182	26 July
Waleran	1182	1184	29 August
Gilbert	1185	1214	24 June
Benedict	1215	1226	19 December

in office. Apart from the query between John and Ascelin, there is no uncertainty attaching to this list. From Siward through to John and from Ascelin onwards, the succession is securely attested, by evidence from external as well as from Rochester sources.

The dates given in the last column of this table are the anniversaries recorded in a Rochester text which seems to have been overlooked by Greenway and others, despite having long been available in print.¹ The text in question, apparently compiled in about 1230 – after the death of Bishop Benedict, but before the death of Benedict’s successor – supplies us with a list of the chief anniversaries commemorated by the monks of Rochester.² Unless with the exception of John II, every bishop from Siward to Benedict is represented by an entry in this list, though some of the names are inscrutable at first sight: Ernst appears as a super-numerary ‘Ernulf’, Ascelin as ‘Anselm’, Gilbert as an erasure – mute evidence of the hatred felt for him by subsequent generations of Rochester monks. The monks’ disputes with Bishop Gilbert are a subject to which we shall have to revert below. But we can start with two definite facts. It is tolerably certain that John, Bishop of Rochester, died on or about 20 June 1137, and that Ascelin, prior of Dover, was appointed to the bishopric of Rochester in 1142.

The death of Bishop John was one of the events recorded under the year 1137 by a contemporary annalist writing at St Augustine’s.³ The date is given there as 20 June; Rochester sources give 21 June as the

1. The *Custumale Roffense* (Maidstone, Kent Archives Office, DRc/R2) is a thirteenth-century compilation, printed – not quite completely – by J. Thorpe, *Custumale Roffense* (London, 1788), pp. 1–37. Mostly its contents agree with, and seem to have been copied from, the early thirteenth-century register B[ritish] L[ibrary], Cotton, Vespasian A. xxii; but there are some additions, including this list of anniversaries, fo. 68rv (ed. Thorpe, p. 37).

2. Two priors of Rochester are also listed: Ralph (20 April) and Silvester (23 October). Silvester was in office in 1180; and this Ralph is the second prior of that name – Ralph de Ros, in office from before 1193 till after 1207.

3. F. Liebermann, *Ungedruckte anglo-normannische Geschichtsquellen* (Strasbourg, 1879), p. 80, from BL, Cotton, Nero A. viii.

date of John's anniversary.¹ From the annals of St Augustine's, many entries – including this one – found their way, by some uncertain route, into an annalistic text which seems to survive only as a copy from Rochester.² The Vespasian annals (as I refer to them from here onwards) are well informed about matters affecting Christ Church and may perhaps have been compiled there. After 1137, the Vespasian annals do not mention Rochester again till 1142, under which year we find an entry recording Ascelin's succession to the bishopric.³ From this and other sources, we know for certain that Ascelin died in January 1148 – on 23 January according to a Rochester source (Table 1), on 24 January according to the Christ Church sources used by Gervase.⁴ Though Gervase admits to some uncertainty over the chronology of events in the 1140s, he ought to be right about the month and day: Ascelin had been a monk of Christ Church before he was put in charge of the priory at Dover. Furthermore, Gervase adds the remark that Ascelin's death occurred in the sixth year of his episcopate; and there seems no reason why he should mention this, unless because he happened to know it for a fact. Thus we are left with an interval of five years, give or take some months, between John's death (June 1137) and Ascelin's consecration (after January 1142).

There is only one surviving document which gives (or purports to give) a coherent account of the sequence of events following the death of Bishop John. In or soon after 1203, no later than 1205, the monks of Rochester drew up a written statement protesting against their mistreatment by Bishop Gilbert.⁵ The petition is addressed to Archbishop Hubert, the bishops of London and Chichester, the prior of Christ Church and Master Simon of Sywell (one of the Archbishop's administrative assistants). By luck the original survives, among a large collection of miscellaneous documents, seemingly derived from the pending trays of Hubert's secretariat, which finished up in the hands of the Christ Church monks.⁶ This document carries very considerable weight. It declares itself to have been written on behalf of the whole community: 'prior R[alph] and the humble convent of the church of Rochester'; and it was meant to stand up to scrutiny, not just from Archbishop Hubert and the other arbitrators, but also from Bishop Gilbert. Even so, it has to be remembered that the document only exists because of the monks' dispute with the bishop;

1. As well as in the list of anniversaries, this date appears in Vespasian A. xxii, fo. 107r, and Custumale, fo. 46v (ed. Thorpe, p. 24), probably copied from Vespasian.

2. Vespasian A. xxii, fos. 9r–33v. This section of the manuscript is described by A. G. Watson (comp.), *Catalogue of Dated and Datable Manuscripts c. 700–1600 in the Department of Manuscripts, The British Library* (London, 1979), p. 108. The text itself has not been printed.

3. Vespasian A. xxii, fo. 29v.

4. W. Stubbs (ed.), *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury* (Rolls Series, 1879–80), i. 132.

5. The text is printed, not very satisfactorily, by N. Adams and C. Donahue Jr (ed.), *Select Cases from the Ecclesiastical Courts of the Province of Canterbury* (Selden Society, 1981), pp. 41–6.

6. C. R. Cheney, *Hubert Walter* (London, 1967), p. 187.

and the facts which are mentioned are those which favoured the monks – or which could be made to look as if they did.

After a brief preamble, the author launches into a historical disquisition, citing the main events which affected his church, from 1066 onwards. Each bishop is mentioned in turn: Gundulf, Ralph, Ernulf, John. Then we come to a passage which can be loosely translated as follows:

Things continued like this till the church of Rochester was burnt for the first time¹ and Bishop John passed away. While the see was vacant, Henry I died and Count Stephen succeeded to the kingdom. He gave custody of the church of Rochester to John, Bishop of Sées, whom he had brought with him to England, and the Bishop held this responsibility for a period of three years. Meanwhile, because of the damage resulting from the fire, the monks had been dispersed among several abbeys, a few only remaining at Rochester. It was Bishop John, acting more like a thief than the guardian of another man's flock, who gave a number of churches to Master Robert Pullen – despite the protests of the monks who were still in residence – together with the office of archdeacon. After John had gone home, Ascelin became bishop; and once the buildings had been repaired the monks returned to Rochester. When they discovered that they had been robbed of their churches, they appealed to the apostolic see. Some of the brethren were sent to Rome and they reported everything which had happened to the lord Pope. The Bishop went to Rome as well, laying a complaint before the Pope against his archdeacon's insubordination.²

The details of this litigation are not of any relevance, but it needs to be said that the outcome was less than satisfactory, from the monks' point of view. Moreover, they had to live with the consequences for almost fifty years – that is, till the death of Pullen's nephew and successor, Archdeacon Paris, in 1190². And Paris's death, when it finally did occur, worked to the advantage of Bishop Gilbert, not of the Rochester monks.

This passage of narrative has some questionable features. There is certainly some confusion in the chronology. It is not the case that Stephen succeeded 'while the see was vacant': he was crowned in December 1135, a year and a half before the death of Bishop John. On the other hand, the author is right – or at least he is not far wrong – in stating that the Bishop of Sées came over to England with Stephen. From the evidence of the charters he witnessed, the Bishop of Sées is known to have been in attendance on the King during the first few months of 1136 – at York in February, at Westminster in March.³ More alarmingly, there has to be some bias affecting the whole account, because it implies – by silence – that the Archbishop of Canterbury had no role in the affair.

It is true, we know, that there was a fire at Rochester, shortly before the death of Bishop John – probably on 3 June 1137. The destruction

1. This alludes to the fact that Rochester suffered a second fire in 1179.

2. Adams and Donahue, *Select Cases*, p. 43.

3. The evidence can be traced through the index in H. A. Cronne and R. H. C. Davis (ed.), *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, iii (Oxford, 1968).

it caused was serious enough for the event to be recorded by the annalist at St Augustine's,¹ in the same entry which continues by recording John's death. We can readily believe that this calamity, followed within three weeks by the death of the Bishop, precipitated a crisis for the monks. The statement that they had to be evacuated from Rochester, 'dispersed among several abbeys', cannot be confirmed (as far as I know) by evidence from elsewhere; but it seems sufficiently plausible. However, the full gravity of the crisis does not become clear till we take account of one additional fact, not mentioned by the author of this petition: it coincided with a vacancy at Canterbury.² Archbishop William – the archbishop responsible for appointing Bishop John – had died some months before, in November 1136, and the King was in no hurry to allow the election of his successor. Till that election took place, the see of Rochester would have to stay vacant too: it would be up to the new archbishop – once elected – to nominate a new bishop for Rochester. Meanwhile, with a clear conscience, the King could send in officials of his own to administer the estates belonging to the vacant bishopric, along with those of the vacant archbishopric.

According to the monks' petition, responsibility for the diocese was entrusted temporarily to the Bishop of Sées, whose name is reported, quite correctly, as John. This Bishop John – of Sées (1124–44), not of Rochester – was one of Stephen's most loyal supporters, and there is no difficulty in believing this part of the story. Despite the trouble he caused for the monks, we shall shortly see that the Bishop is listed by name among the church's benefactors. It was the Bishop of Sées, by this account, who gave the job of archdeacon to Robert Pullen, a scholar and teacher of some contemporary distinction.³ Apart from the usual perquisites, the Bishop is said to have given him three parish churches (Boxley, Aylesford, Southfleet), the altar of St Nicholas in the Cathedral and the dependent church of St Margaret in the southern suburb of Rochester. All of these belonged to the monks – or so the monks asserted.

The next stage in the story is the most obscure. In December 1138, under pressure from a papal legate, the King consented to the election of a new archbishop. The choice fell on Theobald, Abbot of Bec. His consecration followed promptly, in January 1139; and the Rochester estates would presumably have been handed over to him, at around this time, with the rest of the estates belonging to the archbishopric. Yet Bishop Ascelin, as we know, was not appointed till three (perhaps nearly four)

1. Liebermann, *Geschichtsquellen*, p. 80. This sentence too recurs in the Vespasian annals; and it also turns up in Stubbs, *Gervase*, i. 100. Further afield, the fire attracted the attention of the Worcester chronicler too: J. R. H. Weaver (ed.), *The Chronicle of John of Worcester, 1118–1140* (Oxford Historical Society, 1908), p. 43.

2. The same coincidence occurred again in 1184, when Bishop Waleran chanced to die soon after Archbishop Richard. From what we know of the course of events in 1184–5, we are better able to guess what ought to have happened after the death of Bishop John.

3. Pullen rose to be a cardinal and papal chancellor. His career is described most fully by F. Courtney, *Cardinal Robert Pullen* (Rome, 1954). In Rochester sources his surname appears consistently as *Pullus*.

years later. The author who drafted the monks' petition – writing some sixty years after the event, unsure of his chronology and reticent about the Archbishop's role – does not help us to understand the reasons for delay. Even so, unless we think that he had misunderstood the sequence of events, or had chosen to misrepresent it, we have to conclude that the bishopric did stay vacant, for a period of roughly five years, following the death of Bishop John in June 1137. For part of this time, the see would have been administered by the Bishop of Sées – by chance another John. For the rest of the time, so we have to assume, it would have been administered by Archbishop Theobald. After some unexplained delay, Ascelin succeeded to the bishopric; and the monks were then brought back to Rochester, 'once the buildings had been repaired'.

By itself, this account seems reasonably convincing. Though the story as a whole cannot be checked against sources from outside Rochester, at least some of the details are true, or probably true. In particular, we note the absence of any reference to a second Bishop John (as distinct from the Bishop of Sées). We meet the same significant silence in other early thirteenth-century sources from Rochester – sources which would be more or less certain to mention John II, if he had truly existed. As indicated already, the *Vespasian* annals include entries recording the fire of 1137, the death of Bishop John in the same year, and the appointment of Bishop Ascelin in 1142. They say nothing of any John II. Some of the entries in question originated at St Augustine's, others perhaps at Christ Church; so Rochester matters may not have been reported consistently. The point is, none the less, that an early thirteenth-century Rochester scribe – who certainly did make some additions to the text – apparently felt no need to amplify these entries by mentioning the existence of a second Bishop John.¹

Also in *Vespasian*, by the hand of the same scribe, we find a long list of the church's benefactors.² Though its overall arrangement is rather confused, some groups of entries are organized systematically. The most obvious such group is a sequence of entries which represents a chronologically ordered roster of all benefactors holding the rank of bishop (with the exception of Bishop Benedict, for whom we find a separate entry, towards the end of the list). The sequence consists of the following names:

Lanfrancus archiepiscopus ...

Gundulfus ...

Radulfus episcopus Roffensis, postea archiepiscopus Cantuariensis ...

Ernulfus episcopus, pater noster post episcopum Gundulfum ...

Iohannes episcopus ...

Iohannes episcopus Sagiensis ...

Ascelinus episcopus ...

1. But a fourteenth-century hand did eventually add a marginal note next to annal 1142: *Obiit Iohannes Roffensis episcopus, successit Ascelinus* (*Vespasian* A. xxii, fo. 29v).

2. *Ibid.* fos. 81v–91r, printed in full by J. Thorpe, *Registrum Roffense* (London, 1769), pp. 116–24.

Walterus episcopus ...
Gwalerannus episcopus ...
Gilebertus episcopus ...
*Hubertus archiepiscopus ...*¹

From Gundulf to Gilbert, every bishop of Rochester – unless with the exception of John II – is represented by an entry here. There is an entry even for Waleran, who died within two years of his consecration. Confronting this list with the annals, we should have to conclude – even if we did not have the circumstantial account provided by the monks’ petition of 1203×5 – that the see stayed vacant for several years, after the death of John. We might even suspect that the Bishop of Sées had some formal connection with the church, during this period, which led to his being included in the list of benefactors. One further item of negative evidence – not cited in any previous consideration of the problem – is the thirteenth-century list of anniversaries, the relevant entries from which are noted in Table 1. From Siward through to Benedict, every bishop of Rochester – unless with the exception of John II – is represented by an entry in this list. There is an entry even for Arnost, who survived for ‘only half a year’² and was dead and gone before the monks arrived. If negative evidence can ever be conclusive, this list supplies us with proof that John II did not exist.³

Now we can turn to the evidence which points in the opposite direction. In the same manuscript which includes the annals and the list of benefactors, in the same hand again, there is a collection of lists of bishops;⁴ and the Rochester list, as Saltman pointed out,⁵ ends with the following sequence of names: *Ernulfus, Iohannes i, Iohannes ii, Ascelinus, Walterus, Walerannus, Gilebertus, Benedictus*. Taken out of context, this list might

1. Vespasian A. xxii, fos. 85v–7r (ed. Thorpe, pp. 120–1).

2. R. M. Thomson (ed.), *The Life of Gundulf Bishop of Rochester* (Toronto, 1977), p. 38. Not ‘for one and a half years’, as Greenway, *Fasti*, p. 75, mistranslates these words (which she cites from a second-hand source).

3. Another document, not from the Rochester archive, provides us with a list of the bishops of Rochester – a list which (arguably) ought to be complete, but which fails to include John II. In 1154×61 the nuns of Malling obtained a charter from Archbishop Theobald – A. Saltman, *Theobald Archbishop of Canterbury* (London, 1956), pp. 395–6 – confirming all the property given and confirmed to them by earlier charters, including those of successive bishops of Rochester: *cartis etiam fratrum nostrorum episcoporum Roffensium, Gundulfi, Radulfi, Annulfi, Iohannis, Anselmi, Walteri*. Despite some garbling of the names (*Annulfi* for *Ernulfi*, *Anselmi* for *Ascelini*), the sequence is correct. No name is missing, unless with the exception of John II. Of course, it would be easy to think of reasons why the name of one short-lived bishop might be missing from this list. It remains true, none the less, that when we look for proof of the existence of John II, in a place where we may reasonably expect to find it, we come away empty-handed.

4. Vespasian A. xxii, fos. 120v–2v. Though the lists are not consistently up to date, the latest names are of Eustace, Bishop of London (elected and consecrated in 1221), and Pandulf, Bishop of Norwich (elected in 1215, but not consecrated till 1222). Assuming that the Rochester list (fo. 120v) was up to date, we can take it that the scribe was at work on these lists between 1221 and 1227.

5. Saltman, ‘John II’, 74.

be thought enough to prove the point. It certainly seems to justify the conclusion that there was a belief in the existence of John II, at least as early as around 1220, among the Rochester monks themselves. In the light of what we know already, however, we still have to wonder whether this belief was correct.

In fact, this list is not a primary source. The same scribe who wrote most of the Vespasian manuscript (including the annals, the list of benefactors and the lists of bishops) was also responsible (so I suggest) for annotating and making some additions to the lists of bishops given in the *Textus Roffensis*.¹ The Rochester list as we find it in Vespasian agrees with the corresponding list in the *Textus* and was presumably copied directly from it. In the *Textus* list (fo. 111r), the names are presented in two parallel columns. Those in the first column – numbered from *i* to *xxiiii*, beginning with *Iustus*, ending with *Goduuinus i* – need not detain us here.² In the second column, the numbering of the lines – from *xxv* to *xxxviii* – is due to the original scribe; but only the very first name, *Goduuinus ii*, is written in his hand. Subsequent names were added from time to time, by several different scribes. The last name of all is that of Hamo de Hethe (1319–52).

Before considering this part of the list more closely, it is helpful to look across at the list of archbishops of Canterbury given on the previous page (fo. 110v). This list is of similar appearance, up to a point. Here too, the original scribe was responsible for numbering the lines, in both columns, as far as *xxxix*, and for entering all the names as far as *Rodulfus* (line 35). The date of the original list can be fixed with unusual precision: it cannot be earlier than 1122 and is very unlikely to be later than 1123.³ Here too, the list was brought up to date from time to time, and the last of the added names is that of Archbishop Walter (1313–27) – apparently written by the same hand which added Hamo's name to the Rochester list. Given the very clear evidence for the dating of the Canterbury list, we can take it as certain that the Rochester list would originally have ended with the name of Bishop Ernulf (1115–24). Writing in or after 1122, the *Textus* scribe would not have dreamt of omitting Ernulf's name. On the other hand, from the fact that he did not include the name of Archbishop William, we can safely infer that he would not have included the name of Bishop John – appointed by Archbishop William in 1125. As it left the hands of the *Textus* scribe, the Rochester list would indubitably have ended with *Ernulfus*.

1. P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Textus Roffensis* (Copenhagen, 1957–62), fos. 110v–16r, the manuscript itself being now in Maidstone, Kent Archives Office, DRc/R1. The Vespasian scribe was responsible for identifying the various sees by inserting the words *Londonienses*, *Cicestrenses* and so on; he also added names to a few of the lists (Hereford, Lincoln, Norwich). The continuation of the list of popes, on a new leaf inserted for the purpose (fo. 106), is the work of the same scribe.

2. This part of the list was printed and discussed by R. I. Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Episcopal Lists, Parts I–II', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, ix (1965), 71–95, at p. 83.

3. The date of Ralph's death is written in smaller script above the line by the main scribe; the name of the next archbishop, elected in 1123, was added by a different hand.

But such is no longer the case. As was noticed by Wharton,¹ this portion of the list has been altered. *Ernulfus* is one of a block of seven names all written by the same untidy hand, apparently over an erasure. Moreover, the scribe who was responsible for making this alteration seems to have been the same who added the name of Bishop Gilbert (1185–1214) in the Rochester list and the names of archbishops Baldwin (1194–90) and Hubert (1193–1205) in the Canterbury one. Offsetting the corrector's contribution and ignoring everything later, we have the following list:²

xxv	<i>Goduinus ii</i>
xxvi	. . . (<i>Sywardus</i>)
xxvii	. . . (<i>. rnostus</i>)
xxviii	. . . (<i>Gundulfus</i>)
xxix	. . . (<i>. adulfus</i>)
xxx	. . . (<i>Ernulfus</i>)
xxxi	. . . (<i>. ohannes i</i>)
xxxii	. . . (<i>Iohannes ii</i>)
xxxiii	(<i>Ascelinus</i>)
xxxiiii	(<i>Walterius</i>)
xxxv	(<i>Walerannus</i>)
xxxvi	(<i>Gilebertus</i>)
xxxvii	
xxxviii	

John II's is one of the seven rewritten names: specifically it is the last of them. If Archbishop Hubert's name was indeed added by the corrector, it follows that this scribe was active at some time after 1193. In view of the controversy surrounding the election of Hubert's successor, a *terminus ante quem* is harder to define; but presumably 1213 is the latest conceivable date for a list of archbishops excluding Stephen Langton. Accordingly, the *Vespasian* list – not earlier than 1221 – seems to have been copied from the *Textus* list after the latter had been worked on by the corrector.

It is clear that we cannot regard these lists as conclusive proof of the existence of John II. The evidence is belated – by fifty years at least – and compromised by its association with signs of alteration. More than that, we have to suspect that the *Textus* list was altered for the very purpose of making it include the name *Iohannes ii*. Of course, there is scope for a charitable interpretation. Perhaps a belief in the existence of John II arose from some honest mistake. In that event, however, the name which was thought to be missing could easily have been inserted – between the lines, or alongside the existing names. Instead, the corrector went to the trouble of erasing and rewriting seven lines, as if with the intention of disguising the fact that the list had been tampered with.

It seems clear, from the way in which he went about altering the list, that the corrector was guilty of something more than jumping to the

1. H. Wharton, *Anglia Sacra* (London, 1691), i. 343.

2. The manuscript has been damaged by water and some of the coloured initials have become illegible.

wrong conclusion. He was fabricating evidence which would seem to prove the existence of a non-existent bishop. This is, for me, the crux of the whole question. If we take it as given that John II did not exist, can we envisage any circumstances in which the Rochester monks might have wished to persuade us that he did? For a possible explanation, we need to look at two charters given to the monks by Bishop John. Both these charters – surviving as copies in Rochester’s early thirteenth-century cartulary¹ – had lasting importance for the monks. Their authenticity is far from certain; but they seem sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this discussion.

The first² relates to three of the manors which had been allocated to the monks by Bishop Gundulf, but which gave rise to disputes with later bishops (with Ascelin in particular). Obliging enough, the Bishop provides us with a list of his predecessors: he says, or is made to say, that he has given back to the monks the manors of Haddenham and Stoke as they were held ‘in the time of my predecessors Gundulf and Ralph and Ernulf’. Saltman comments: ‘At first sight one might be tempted to attribute the charter to Ernulf’s successor John I.’ Unlike Saltman, not just at first sight, I cheerfully succumb to this temptation. The second charter³ formed part of the justification for the monks’ claim to the patronage of Boxley church – one of the churches at issue in their dispute with Archdeacon Robert Pullen. According to the monks, this church had been given to the church of Rochester by Henry I, assigned to the monks by Bishop John, and confirmed to them by Archbishop William.⁴ If this story is true, the Bishop’s charter ought to date from 1130×6. Even if John II did exist, this document could hardly be attributed to him without some special pleading.

As Saltman pointed out, both these charters are witnessed by Archdeacon Robert. For him, this seemed enough to prove that they could not be charters of the Bishop John who died in 1137. Given that Robert Pullen was not appointed archdeacon till after John was dead, Saltman argued that there must have been a second Bishop John, and that these charters would have to be attributed to him. But if we start from the premise that John II did not exist, a contrary interpretation suggests

1. BL, Cotton, Domitian x, fos. 90–208. As noted by Brett, ‘Forgery at Rochester’, p. 402, the earliest and largest part of the cartulary (fos. 97r–182r) seems all to be the work of a single scribe. One of the documents he copied (fo. 178v, printed by Thorpe, *Registrum Roffense*, p. 527) is witnessed by Bishop Benedict, so cannot be earlier than 1215. But documents just a few years later than this were added by a subsequent scribe.

2. Domitian x, fo. 120r, printed by Saltman, ‘John II’, 73.

3. Domitian x, fo. 119r, printed by Thorpe, *Registrum Roffense*, p. 177.

4. Boxley was a royal manor and the parish was part of the Archbishop’s diocese. The King’s charter – Domitian x, fo. 102v, printed by Thorpe, loc. cit., calendared by C. Johnson and H. A. Cronne (ed.), *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, ii (Oxford, 1956), no. 1728 – is slightly problematic, but may be genuine. It says that the gift was made when the King attended the dedication of Rochester Cathedral; and the King’s presence at that ceremony, on 8 May 1130, is confirmed by John of Worcester (ed. Weaver, p. 30). The Archbishop’s charter – *Textus Roffensis*, inserted quire, fo. 179v; Domitian x, fo. 118r – is plainly not authentic as it stands. At best, the witness list may derive from a genuine document of 1126×8; but presumably that document would not have had anything to do with Boxley church.

itself. We have to consider the possibility that this Archdeacon Robert, contemporary with Bishop John, was a different person from Archdeacon Robert Pullen. In other words, perhaps we have to admit the existence, not of two successive bishops called John, but rather of two successive archdeacons called Robert. At all events, there appears to be plenty of scope for subsequent confusion. By the turn of the century, the first Archdeacon Robert could have been more or less forgotten – though *Robertus archidiaconus*, presumably this man, does appear in the list of benefactors.¹ But the monks had several painful reasons for remembering Robert Pullen.

Looking at one of the documents witnessed by the first Archdeacon Robert, somebody might have been struck by the thought – the same thought which occurred to Saltman – that it seemed to be vitiated by anachronism. How could a charter given by a bishop John be witnessed by an archdeacon Robert? After writing their petition to Archbishop Hubert and others, in 1203×5, the monks would have been committed to the statement that John's death preceded Robert Pullen's appointment. Perhaps they realized, a little later, that documents important to their case might be challenged in consequence, and decided that something would have to be done to ensure that they were protected against this risk. It was in those circumstances, I suspect, that the monks felt obliged to postulate the existence of an imaginary bishop, John II, to whom these charters might be attributed – as they were by Saltman – if it ever came to the crunch. Apparently it never did; and the monks never had to make up their minds exactly who this John was – whether he was supposed to be the same person as John, Bishop of Sées, or somebody else. Unanswered by the monks, this question became an unanswerable conundrum for modern historians.

A problem which has remained unsolved so long is not likely to be disposed of finally by one short article. There are some loose ends I know of;² and there may be others. None the less, I hope that this paper will tilt the balance in favour of the view that John II was an imaginary figure. The idea of his existence appears to have originated in the early thirteenth century; and it seems to have been engendered, somehow or other, by the squabbles between Bishop Gilbert and the monks of Rochester.

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1. *Vespasian A.* xxii, fo. 90r (ed. Thorpe, p. 124). If the scribe had thought that this Archdeacon Robert was identical with Robert Pullen, we would rather expect him to tell us so explicitly.

2. Most notably, I have not discussed the difficulties caused by one particular charter to which Saltman attached great weight. Surviving only as a fourteenth-century copy, this document – Thorpe, *Registrum Roffense*, p. 370, also pp. 412–13 – seems problematic on any interpretation. Brett, 'Forgery at Rochester', p. 410, takes it to mean that the Bishop of Sées regarded himself (and was regarded by the Pope) as bishop of Rochester too. That still seems doubtful to me. I suspect that this document may be a charter of Bishop Ascelin (in which case it would date from 1144×5) misread as a charter of John II by somebody who believed in his existence. But even this rash conjecture would not provide a perfect explanation.