

Saint Vigor

Missionary and Bishop of Bayeux

An Account of the Patron Saint
of the parish churches of
Fulbourn, Cambridgeshire
and
Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Somerset

by

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1898 - 1993



The illustrations:

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| front cover | A statue of Saint Vigor in the Abbey at Cerisy |
| above | A carving of Saint Vigor in bishop's robes, in Bayeux Cathedral |
| page 2 | (upper) St. Vigor's Church, Stratton-on-the-Fosse: <i>drawing by Peter Pengelley.</i> |
| | (lower) St. Vigor's Church, Fulbourn: <i>drawing by Philip Nicholson.</i> |
| page 5 | Saint Vigor and the Dragon |
| page 6 | The Abbey at Cerisy (exterior) |
| page 7 | The Abbey at Cerisy (interior) |
| | All the above (<i>except as noted</i>) are drawings by Richard Sell. |

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Saint Vigor

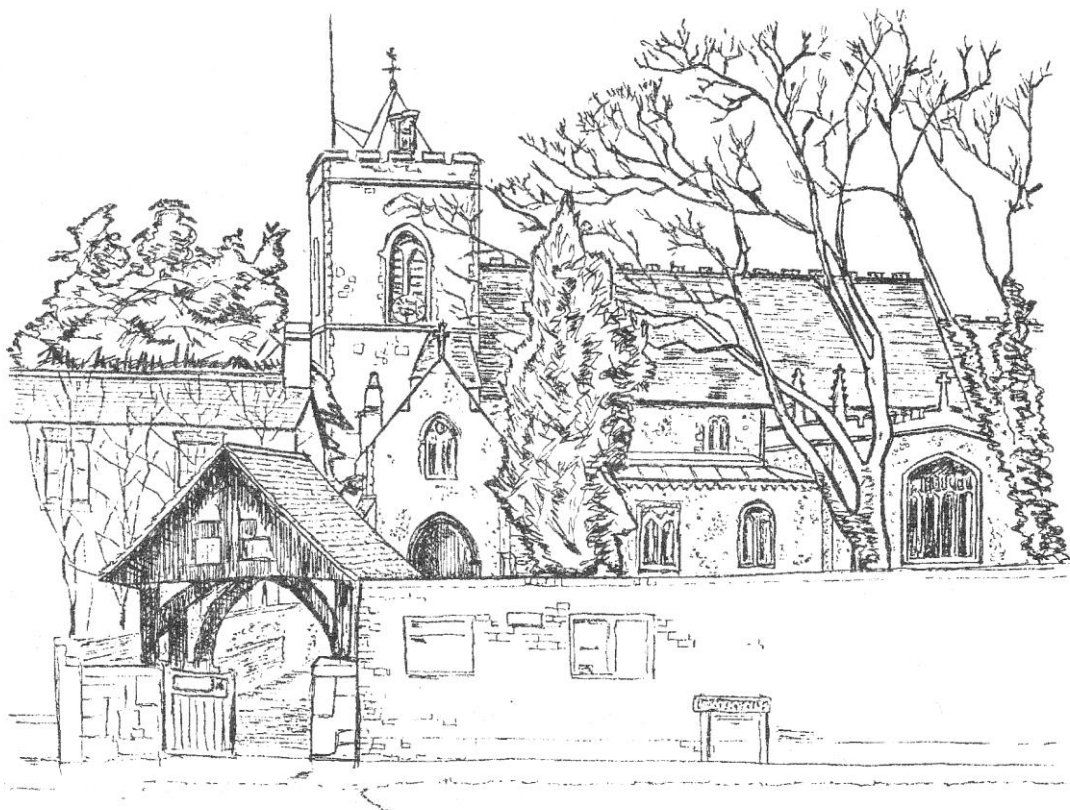
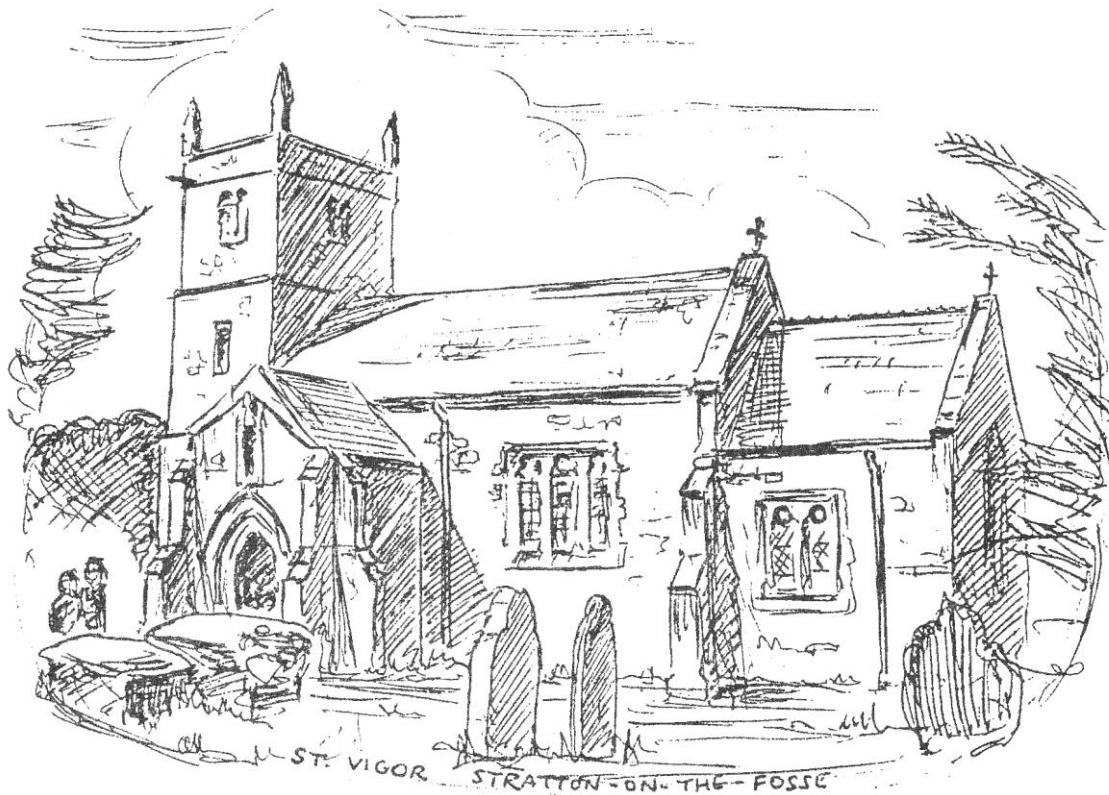
There are only two Churches in England dedicated to Saint Vigor: at Fulbourn in Cambridgeshire, and at Stratton-on-the-Fosse in Somerset. They both date from the years following the Conquest, and indicate the reverence with which his memory was held by the Normans. In their homeland, he was the subject of a veritable cult, and more than thirty churches and monastic establishments bore his name.

We know that he was born at some date in the latter half of the fifth century, probably in or near the town of Arras; that his missionary zeal and reputation for sanctity caused him to be elected Bishop of Bayeux, where he died on All Saints' Day (November 1st) somewhere between 530 and 537 A.D.. Little else of historical fact, but an abundance of legend, some manuscripts, and the witness of religious buildings and sculptures that have survived the centuries, enable his steps to be retraced and his accomplishments assessed.

The Revd G. Aubourg, a priest and scholar, examined the available evidence in great detail. The results of his researches were published by the Antiquarian Society of Normandy in 1963 and 1966. It is to this source that we are indebted for the matter included in this brief sketch. In England there was obviously no popular tradition connected with Saint Vigor, indeed there are few who could identify him. It is all the more interesting that as a result of these researches, he emerges as a man of some culture, an able administrator, a man of great courage and Christian devotion.

The world of Saint Vigor

We are talking about a period close on fifteen hundred years ago, which is not only distant in time, but is even more obscure than the classical ages which preceded it. This was indeed the beginning of the Dark Ages, when the Roman culture was fast ebbing away from these northern provinces of the Empire, which were subject to continual barbarian incursions both before and after the rise of Christianity. The people were largely illiterate; many still pagan. The territory that was to become the future province of Normandy was divided by the Romans, for administrative purposes, roughly on the lines of the existing tribal boundaries. Thus, the Bessin (of which Bayeux was the capital) was the land of the Bajocassini. The main centre was at Rouen: the archbishopric also. The dioceses followed this pattern and were established at Bayeux, Coutances, Avranches, etc..



The destruction of documents and buildings by the Vikings and others was only to be equalled by the frenzied iconoclasts of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, the legend of Saint Vigor still persists, many of his religious foundations survive

and he continues to be honoured in his cathedral city and a large part of the surrounding area.

It is extremely difficult to identify with the outlook and thinking of people of such a different age, but in considering the meaning of the legends that have come down to us there are two points that should be born in mind. One is that, at such an epoch the average man had little sense of history, of geography, or of the sequence of events. The other is that the religious imagery by which he was taught ceased to be symbolic: the spirits of evil, ignorance, or unbelief, became literally serpents or dragons belching smoke and flame.

Saint Vigor appears as a zealous missionary, determined to establish Christianity in what was then a Gallo-Roman province, and to eliminate the last vestiges of the pagan Druidical cults and the associations with the Roman pantheon. He is thus frequently portrayed (as were Saint George and Saint Michael) with a fearsome dragon. His dragon, however, is not slain but tamed, and the Saint leads him away with his stole.

The Clues we have

Apart from the evidence of the numerous sculptures and works of art associated with Saint Vigor, and the survival of many of his foundations, we have an eighth century manuscript, the "*Vita Sancti Vigoris*", which purports to describe the life and achievements of the Saint. It is one of a large number of similar documents relating to the saints in the Calendar, and was designed to be read in monasteries on the day of his Festival. These early Bishops and other churchmen, officially declared Saints in response to popular will, were credited with the power to work miracles. Their life-stories, written two or three centuries later and with little access to documentary evidence, relied almost exclusively on word of mouth, legend, and folklore.

The Life of Saint Vigor

It would appear that he was born during the last half of the fifth century; and probably in the neighbourhood of Arras, which was in the country of the Atrebates. The *vita* describes him as being of noble birth, predestined to spiritual achievement, choosing a life of austerity rather than one of worldly comfort. There may well have been some truth in this. Christianity had become the official religion in the previous century during the reign of the Emperor Constantine, and the Roman culture had established roots. The name of Vigor's chosen companion, Theudemir, was a distinguished one among the Merovingian Franks.

The name Vigor is an unusual one. Possibly an adaptation of Wighard or Vichard - in either case signifying strength. All knowledge of his personality and character is irretrievably lost, but his legend strangely still lives on.

The *Vita* tells us that, divinely inspired, he set out from Arras, accompanied by a youth named Theudemir, who was destined to become his life-long disciple. Certain it is, that from wherever he started his journey or by whatever route he

took, he arrived at a town then known as Redeверus (now the Norman village of Reviers) situated at the mouth of the river Seullès. This estuary formed the eastern boundary of the Bessin, whose capital was the cathedral city of Bayeux. Saxon pirates, coming by sea, sailed up the river in their longboats. The seaport town would have had a mixed population with varying degrees of civilisation, and differing faiths. It is here that the saint first built an oratory and (later) in all probability a Church: here that he preached and baptised the converts. It is at Reviers that the first stories of miracles emerge, with the picture of the saint as a great healer - even the dead are raised to life through faith inspired by his teaching. In the days of William the Conqueror, five centuries later, the place was described as "the parish of Saint Vigor".

The Dragon

Saint Vigor was still at Reviers when the incident occurred which gave rise to the most colourful of the legends associated with him: that of the taming of the dragon of Cerisy. The story runs that a powerful landowner named Volusian implored the saint to come to Cerisy and free his people from the thrall of a terrible monster. The man of God consented, and, fearlessly facing the creature, made the sign of the Cross on its head. It was immediately subdued, and Vigor tied his stole around its neck: whereupon Theudemir, who had accompanied him, led it quietly back to the sea - this being the primordial chaos and thus the monster's proper element. In gratitude, Volusian presented Saint Vigor with the vast domain of Cerisy.

The dragon became the symbol of Saint Vigor, as can be seen in the cathedral church of Bayeux and elsewhere. But the dragon itself is the symbol of the forces of ignorance and evil of which the saint was so powerful an enemy.

There are two historical certainties in this story. Volusian did in fact exist. He appears to be a Roman, possibly descended from a patrician family known to Saint Augustine, and owning vast estates. Presumably a Christian, he bestowed his large domain of "Cerisiacum", including twenty-five adjoining villages, on Saint Vigor; who built a monastery there. Saxons and Norsemen totally destroyed the earlier buildings, but in 1030 A.D. Robert II ("le Magnifique"), Duke of Normandy and father of the Conqueror, built a fine Benedictine abbey on the site and dedicated it to Saint Vigor. The abbey still stands, though shorn of much of its original splendour. Solemn ceremonies have recently been held there to mark the fourteenth centenary of the original foundation at Cerisy-la-Forêt.

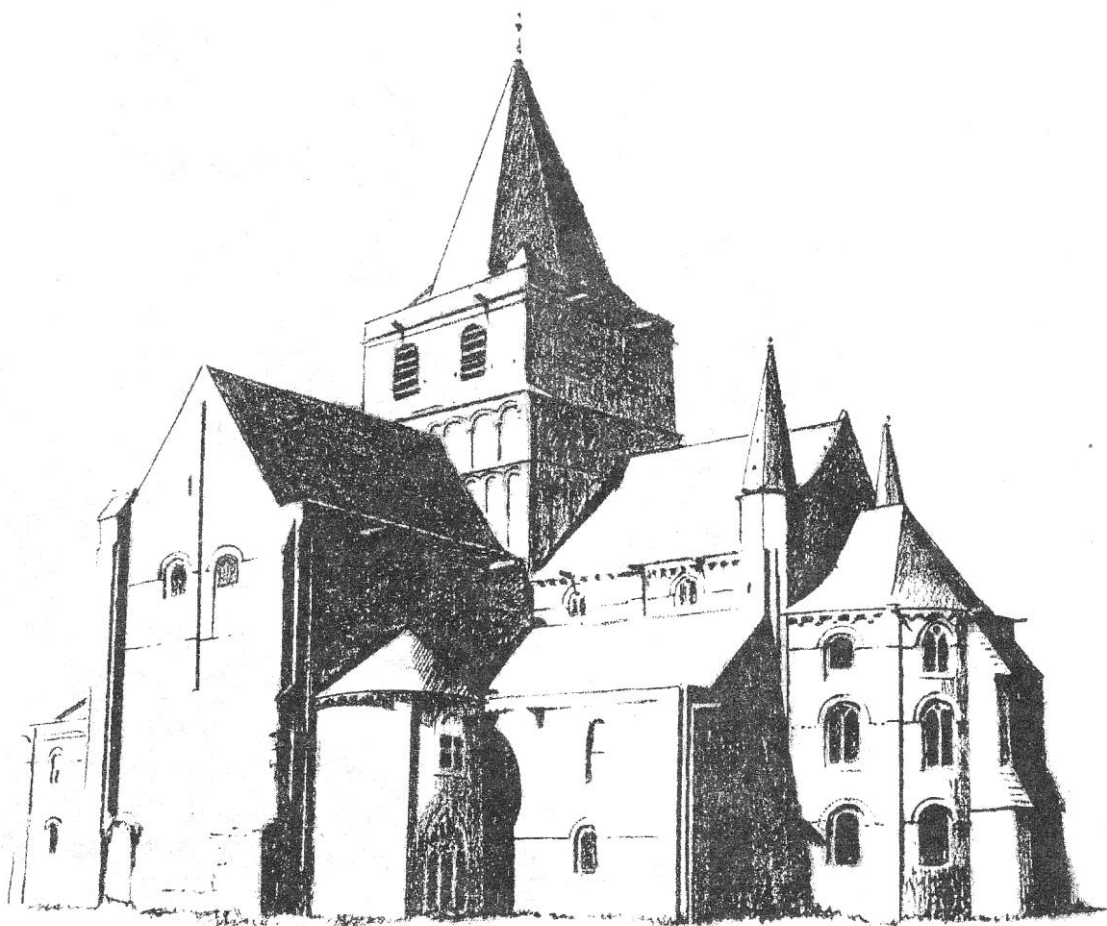
It is not hard to explain the materialisation as dragons or serpents of the fears engendered in these people by the memory of mysterious Druidical rites held in the darkness of the forest or of the strange creatures evoked by the broken idols of former pagan temples. Similar legends are told in other regions, such as Cheux and Cambremer, where the Church acquired territories through the agency of Saint Vigor. At Cheux, near Caen, there was a magnificent twelfth century church dedicated to him. It was partially destroyed during the battle of



Normandy, and has been skilfully restored by the Department of Historical Monuments.

There is no doubt that our saint was one of those great missionaries by whose faith and zeal Christianity triumphed over paganism. It was the enthusiasm and single-mindedness of such men that spread the "good news" among the barbarian peoples. We shall never know, alas, just what were the qualities that Vigor possessed which so appealed to his own and succeeding generations of his countrymen.

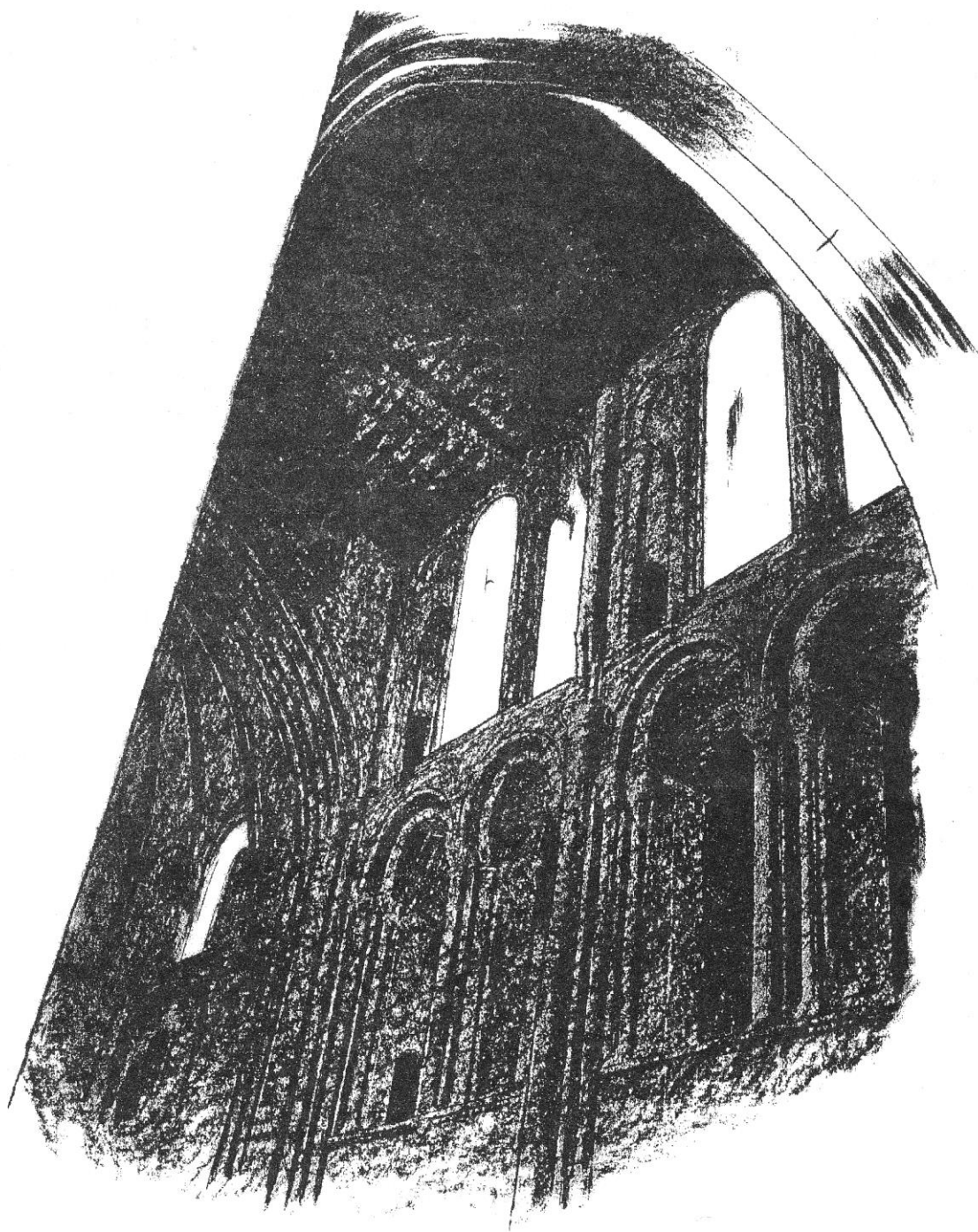
The Religious Foundations



Cerisy

Here again we are beset by uncertainties at every point, and can only guess at probabilities. We know that former pagan temples were frequently converted into Christian *basilicas, and that this was the case at Bayeux and its sister church at the suburb of Saint-Vigor-le-Grand. The latter was the site of a temple dedicated to Belenus Apollo, a syncretistic sun-god; half Druid, half Roman. Excavations tend to confirm the legend of its transformation by Saint Vigor into a Christian Church, and the significant change of name from Mont Phaunus to Mont Chrismat, the place of baptism. It suffered the same fate as Cerisy at the hands of the Vikings, but in 1030 A.D., Odo, half-brother to William the Conqueror, built there a great abbey on a similar plan to that of Cerisy, and dedicated it also to Saint Vigor. This great Church was totally destroyed and its priceless library burnt with a fanatical thoroughness in the Revolution of 1789.

But for this mindless act, we should have known much more. Until 1789 the abbey contained the tomb of Theudemir.



Cerisy

Some buildings escaped the holocaust, and are now known as the Priory of Saint Vigor. As though symbolic of the indestructible spirit of its founder, it now houses a convent of white-robed nuns.

The adjoining parish Church of Saint Vigor preserves the saint's rough-hewn marble throne, on which succeeding bishops are still seated before their consecration at the Cathedral. The *vita* describes how Saint Vigor came to occupy it: "The entire college of clerks, in unison with the mass of the people, requested with one voice that the king, Childebert, should name Saint Vigor as pontiff." This, in fact was the usual procedure at the consecration of a bishop. He would then be led to his throne, raised on a dais in the manner of a Roman governor, and acclaimed with cries of "He is worthy!".

It is not known how many bishops had preceded Vigor: he was probably the fourth in succession to Saint Exuperius.

The Festival of Saint Vigor

The festival of Saint Vigor falls on the first of November, the alleged day of his death. On the introduction (some time in the eighth century) of the feast of All Saints on that day, it became customary to hold it on the second or succeeding days: and such is the present practice at Bayeux.

The English Churches

Alain de la Zouche, a Breton and a powerful aid to William, was granted the lands formerly belonging to "the fair Eddeva", the widow of Edward the Confessor; among them the manor now known as Fulbourn Zouches. The Count of Meulan, who fought at Hastings, and his heirs who owned fiefs in Normandy, were also possessed of land in Fulbourn. Until 1766 (when the tower collapsed) there was another Church alongside St. Vigor's, in the same churchyard. This one was dedicated to All Saints. Could there have been a connection with the day of Saint Vigor's death and his Festival? We can only guess; but it may well have been a gesture to associate one or both of these Churches with Bishop Odo's favourite saint.

NOTE An English translation of Fr. Aubourg's work, made by Mrs Townley, is in the hands of the Rector of Fulbourn. It is too long for publication, but may be consulted by anyone wishing to study the evidence about Saint Vigor further.