

Geoffrey of Burton, *Vita S. Moduene Uirginis*.47¹

There were two villagers living in Stapenhill under the jurisdiction of the abbot of Burton who ran away to the neighbouring village called Drakelow, wrongfully leaving their lords, the monks, and wishing to live under the authority of count Roger the Poitevin.² The father of the monastery ordered that their crops, which had not yet been taken into the barns, should be seized and taken to his own barns, hoping this way to induce them to return to their own dwellings. But these men went off to count Roger and brought a false charge before him, stirring him up and speaking wickedly. The count's anger was aroused against the abbot, so much that he threatened to kill him wherever he might find him. Violently angry, he gathered a great troop of knights and peasants with weapons and carts and sent them in great company to the monks' barns at Stapenhill and had them seize by force all the crops stored there, those belonging to the abbey which should supply the monks' food as well as those of the wicked fugitives. Not content with this, count Roger sent many men and knights to the abbey's fields near Blackpool,³ commanding them to lay waste the church's crops with all their might and encouraging them especially to lure into battle the ten knights of the abbot's own family whom he had in his company. The abbot heard of this and forbade his knights from going out. He and his monks entered the church barefoot and groaning and, in tears, set down on the ground the shrine of the blessed virgin containing her holy bones.⁴ In unison they addressed a desperate appeal to the Lord, beseeching His boundless power with all their hearts that He should deign to help His servants in His goodness, if that were His will, and that He should make known with a manifest miracle His aid to those who were struggling in such difficulty.

Meanwhile, as those inside were praying with one voice, the ten knights decided to ignore the prohibition and, arming themselves with one accord, without the knowledge of the abbot or the monks, mounted their horses boldly and set out to do battle in the field, few against many. One of the abbot's knights immediately spurred his horse into a gallop, struck the count's steward and hurled him to the ground so forcefully that the power of the blow broke his leg. Such a display of strength in the first attack terrified the enemy. Now another of the abbot's knights likewise spurred his horse to a gallop and struck a knight who was a relative of the count, knocking him into a nearby stream, hurling him with tremendous force into the mud far from his horse. The rest of the monk's knights each acted so bravely in this fight that ten men put more than sixty to flight and a few drove very many from the field, to their great shame, through the merit of the virgin and the power of God.

The very next day, at the third hour, the two runaway peasants who were the cause of this evil were sitting down to eat, when they were both suddenly struck down dead. Next morning they were placed

¹ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, ed. and trans. R. Bartlett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), c.47, pp.192-9.

² [Roger the Poitevin](#) (d. before 1140) was the younger son of [Roger de Montgomery](#), first Earl of Shrewsbury (d. 1094). In 1102, Roger the Poitevin was exiled along with his brothers in 1102 following an ineffective rebellion against Henry I led by his eldest brother [Robert de Bellême](#), Earl of Shrewsbury and Count of Ponthieu.

³ This Blackpool is located about half a mile south-west of Burton Abbey in the direction of Drakelow.

⁴ On the humiliation of relics see Robert Bartlett, *Why can the Dead do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 110-111

in wooden coffins and buried in the churchyard at Stapenhill, the village from whence they had fled. What followed was amazing and truly remarkable. That very same day on which they were interred they appeared at evening, while the sun was still up, at Drakelow, carrying on their shoulders the wooden coffins in which they had been buried. The whole following night they walked through the paths and fields of the village, now in the shape of men carrying wooden coffins on their shoulders, now in the likeness of bears or dogs or other animals. They spoke to the other peasants, banging on the walls of their houses and shouting, "Move, quickly, move! Get going! Come!" When these astonishing events had taken place every evening and every night for some time, such a disease afflicted the village that all the peasants fell into desperate straits and within a few days all except three (whom we shall discuss later) perished by sudden death in a remarkable way.

The count, seeing these remarkable occurrences, was stunned and terrified. He repented and came with his knights to the monastery, where he begged humble pardon, made a firm concord with the abbot and the monks, and entreated them with prayers that they should placate God and the virgin [Modwenna] whom he had offended. Before them all, with faithful devotion, he gave a command to Drogo the reeve of the village that there should be double restitution for all the damages her had inflicted, and so, in peace of mind, he left the monastery and hastened without delay to his other lands. Drogo then quickly returned and restored double to the abbey as he had been ordered and, after seeking pardon yet again, left for other parts with all haste, desiring to escape the lethal scourge. The two peasants who still remained in the village (Drogo was the third) fell sick and languished for a long time. Men were living in terror of the phantom dead men who carried their wooden coffins on their shoulders every evening and night... and they received permission from the bishop to go to their graves and dig them up. They found them intact, but the linen cloths over their faces were stained with blood. They cut off the men's heads and placed them in the graves between their legs, tore out the hearts from their corpses, and covered the bodies again with earth. They brought the hearts to a place called *Dodecrossefora/Dodefresford* and there burnt them from morning until evening.⁵ When they had at last been burned up, they cracked with a great sound and everyone saw an evil spirit in the form of a crow fly from the flame. Soon after this was done both the disease and the phantoms ceased. The two peasants sick in their beds recovered their health as soon as they saw the smoke rising from the fire where the hearts were burned. They got up, gathered together their sons and wives and all their possessions, and, giving thanks to God and to the holy virgin [Modwenna] that they had escaped, they departed to the next village, which was called [Church] Gresley, and settled there. Drakelow was thus abandoned and for a long time after no one dared to live there, fearing the vengeance of the Lord that had struck there and wondering at the prodigies that God omnipotent had worked through the holy virgin.⁶

⁵ This place is now untraceable, yet it must have been relatively close to Stapenhill and Drakelow. Stapenhill and Drakelow are themselves only approx. 1.7 miles in distance.

⁶ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*.47, pp.192-9.