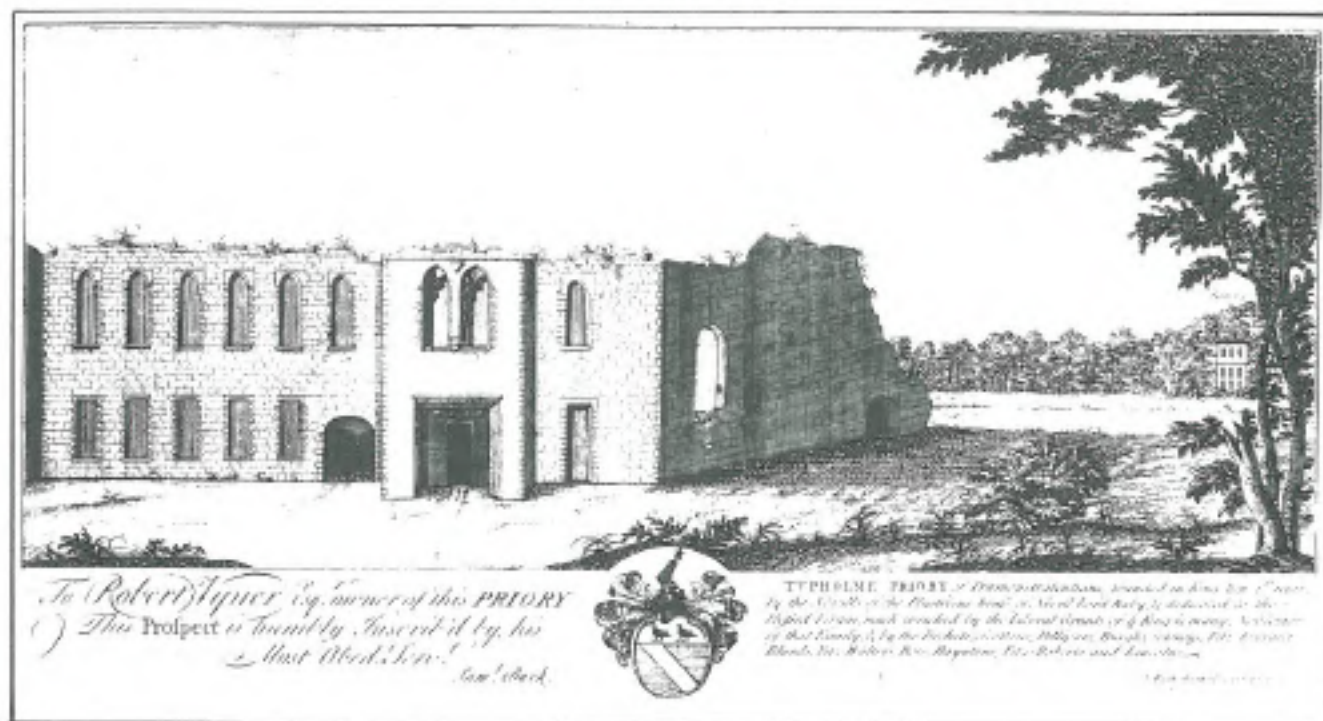


Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 10

TUPHOLME ABBEY



View of the exterior of the Refectory from the south, engraved by Samuel Buck, 1726

INTRODUCTION

Tupholme Abbey lies some 11 miles (17 km) east of Lincoln, on the north side of the River Witham, about 1½ miles (2.4 km) from the river bank. It is close to the B1190 road almost midway between the villages of Bardney and Bucknall and the remains can be seen on rising ground just where the road forms a sharp bend.

No less than six monastic houses lay along this 10-mile stretch of the Witham Valley, forming one of the greatest concentrations in Lincolnshire and indeed in the British Isles. The attraction was the river, navigable to the sea at Boston and forming an easy avenue for the import of foreign goods and the export of wool and finished cloth. It also provided through the rights of fishing and fowling the main elements of the monastic diet. At one time the roads would have been busy with travellers and officials, merchants and labourers, for the monasteries represented wealth, influence, and agriculture. Now the roads are quiet, the monasteries gone. The parish of Tupholme is almost uninhabited, but here unlike most of the Witham Valley monasteries there are significant remains of the Abbey, slight as they are by the standards of neighbouring counties.

The Abbey lies close by the Tupholme Beck, now represented by a much-straightened dyke, some 15 feet (4.5 m) above sea-level. The Beck fell into the Witham until the late 18th century and the monks may have used it as a waterway. Like most low-lying monasteries Tupholme has a notable series of earthworks connected with drainage, security, and the breeding of fish.

HISTORY

Tupholme Abbey belonged to the Premonstratensian Order, which originated at Prémontré in France. Newhouse Abbey in North Lincolnshire was the first house of the Order in England, and from here sometime between 1155 and 1166 set out a colonising party of a newly elected Abbot and twelve canons to found a new monastery on low-lying ground in the parish of Burreth (see below) on land belonging to Gilbert and Alan de Neville. Their first task was to build a church and domestic quarters, perhaps in timber until stone buildings could be constructed. Building appears to have proceeded fairly quickly and as Tupholme was never a wealthy house it is probable that the original buildings survived largely intact to the end: there is no evidence of the lavish reconstructions which were carried out at many monasteries in the intervening centuries.

Tupholme receives few mentions in history: it was probably badly hit by the Black Death in 1349, as a new Abbot had to be appointed in that year. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries we begin to see rather more of it through the reports of official visitations which record the names of the canons and their lapses both moral and of obedience. In 1482 the canons were forbidden to leave the precincts of the monastery without prior permission or to sit up drinking after **compline** (the last service of the day). The penalty for these was to be three days on bread and water. Nine years later the common offences were apparently those of following a new fashion in clothing by wearing the hood inside the cape when outside the Abbey, and of wearing long knives (this probably followed a case of accidental stabbing at another monastery).

In 1497 more serious charges were levelled: William Barlinges was accused of stirring up trouble among the brethren, while Thomas Pynderwelle had become involved with a woman called Philippa, whose child he had fathered. He was ordered to spend five years at Croxton Abbey in Leicestershire (it was usual to banish canons from the scene of their crimes) but three years later he was still at Tupholme, unlike John Forluf, whose insubordination gained him ten years banishment to Sulby Abbey (Northants.).

In 1536 the Abbey, being valued at under £200 per annum, was suppressed along with many of the other smaller monasteries. The last Abbot, John Acaster, was given a pension of £18, while the eight canons each received £1.

THE CANONS

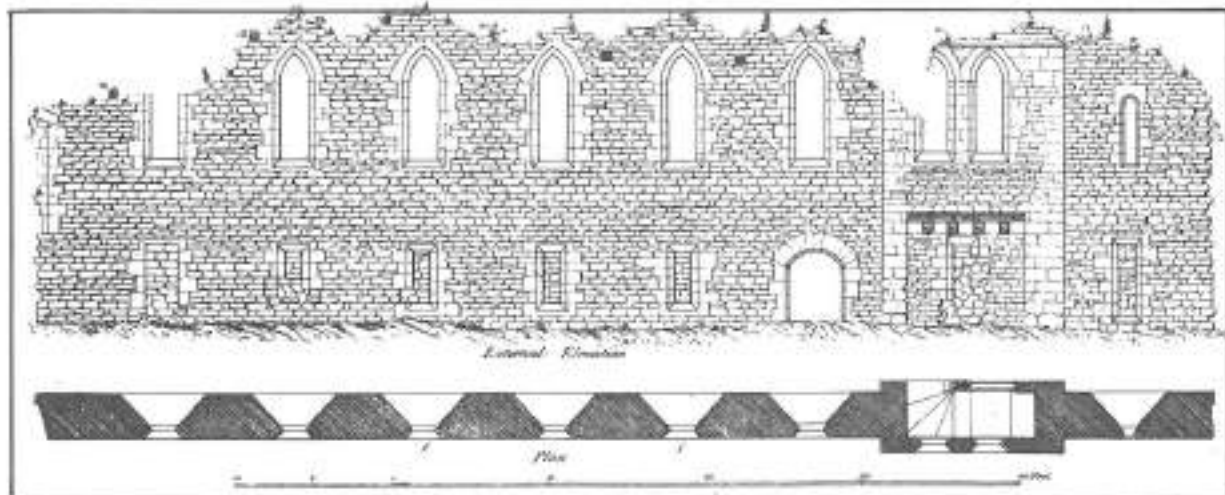
The Canons of Tupholme belonged to the **Premonstratensian** Order, named after the first house at Prémontré near Laon in France, which followed a version of the **Rule of St. Augustine** and was much influenced by the austere Cistercians. All houses owed allegiance to Prémontré, and had to pay an annual tax in cash to it, which caused great problems during the wars with France in the 14th and 15th centuries. Because of the very centralized organization the Premonstratensian monasteries were kept in discipline by the Abbot of Prémontré and not by the Bishop of the local diocese, e.g. the Bishop of Lincoln. In fact the task of visiting and disciplining the English houses was often undertaken by a deputy. At the end of the 15th century Bishop Redman, Abbot of Shap in Cumbria was the official visitor and it is his records which have survived to illustrate life at Tupholme at this date.

From the visitation records we know the names of many of the 15th century canons. New entrants to the Abbey were called **novices** and often served for some seven or eight years before becoming canons. When they did so they took a new name, usually that of their birthplace; from this we can see how and where the Abbey recruited and what the links were between the various Abbeys of the same order. Most of the names are of local villages, many of them places where the Abbey held land, and it seems likely that the brightest young men on the Abbey's estates turned automatically to the Abbey for their future. Other names from further afield represent canons who had been sent from other monasteries of the Order, for promotion or punishment. Tupholme seems to have had especially close links with Croxton Abbey in Leicestershire and its cell at Hornby in Lancashire. In 1482 among the canons at Tupholme we find canons such as

John Bever (= Belvoir), William Leycester, and Thomas Kyrkby who all appear at Croxton in later years, while Richard Doker, Henry Lancaster, and John Gyrsyngham seem from their names to have been recruited from the area around Hornby. Men such as William Barlynges came from Topholme's sister house a few miles to the west. Probably recruits were encouraged to join a monastery far enough from their homes to avoid regular contact with their families and neighbours.

The canons wore a white **habit** (of unbleached wool) and a white **rochet** (an over-tunic with wide sleeves) and white cap;— it is no wonder they were often called the 'White Canons'. Unlike most other monks and canons they frequently acted as priests for the churches owned by the monastery, and so several of the canons would be absent on duty at any one time, along with the **Cellarer** and other officials of the Abbey who supervised outlying lands.

THE BUILDINGS



Exterior elevation of the Refectory by J. S. Padley, 1851

The most notable surviving part of the Abbey is a stretch of the southern wall of the canons' **Refectory** 75 feet (23 m) long, standing nearly to eaves level, with the remains of cellars below, marked by broken vaulting and a series of small windows with rebates for shutters. Mediaeval roof-tiles have been used as spacers between some of the stones. Of the Refectory five tall lancet windows of the mid-13th century survive, together with part of a sixth. Further to the east is the **Reader's Pulpit**, a doorway by

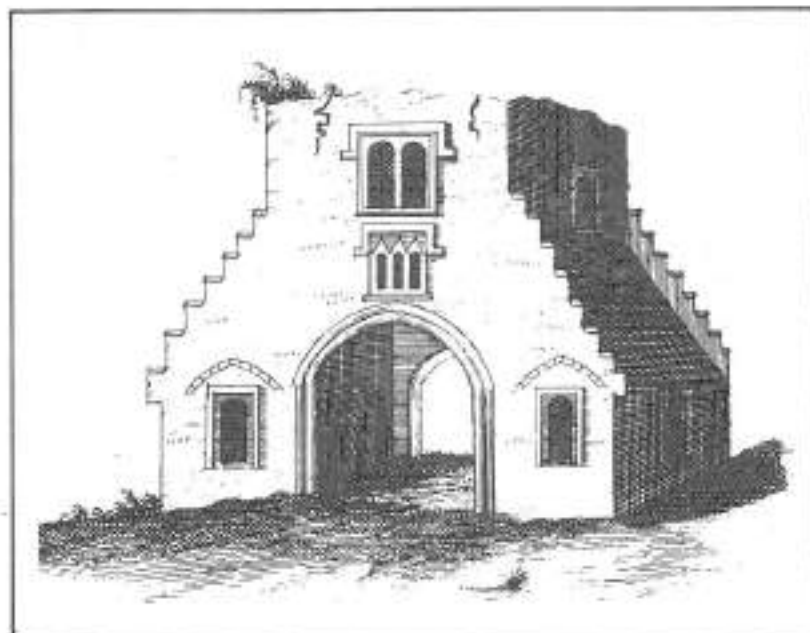


Exterior (left) and interior (right) of Reader's Pulpit

which it was entered and a window with the remains of a seat from which one of the canons would read scriptures to his brethren at mealtimes. This is a rare and almost complete survival of what was once a commonplace in monasteries. The Pulpit is wider than the wall and so stands on a specially extended portion which projects both north and south. Further east still is a single bay containing a round-headed Norman window. Beyond this the wall breaks off and has been replaced in recent times by a jumble of Abbey stonework including carved window mouldings and two corbels in the form of grotesque heads.

From the architectural details it would appear that the building was constructed from east to west during the late 12th and early 13th centuries and was not afterwards altered. It was usual to begin at the east end of the Abbey church and work westwards and around the **Cloister** as money permitted. The Abbey may have been virtually complete by c. 1250.

This section of Refectory wall now leans to the south against 18th and 19th century farm buildings at present deserted and ruined, but an engraving by Samuel Buck made in 1726 shows the view from the south before the construction of these farm buildings. In addition to showing the wall in a rather more complete state than it is now Buck's engraving shows the northward turn of the wall with a single large window at half height perhaps belonging to the **Warming House**, the only communal room in the Abbey with a fireplace. If so it is hard to see where the canons' **Dormitory** could be, which usually runs along this range at first floor level. Alternatively Buck may have been trying to show a door leading into another range of buildings. Further north is shown a door at ground level no doubt leading through from the Cloister to the **Infirmary** where sick and elderly canons were housed. Beyond this the wall breaks off just short of the **Chapter House** where the canons met each week to confess and be praised or punished. It is clear that even in 1726 the **Church** had long disappeared. At the west end of the **Refectory** wall a chamfered angle probably marks the position of another door or window at half height. At some date between 1710 and 1720 the antiquary William Stukeley sketched the **Abbey Gatehouse**. This was pulled down before the end of the century and even its exact site is unknown, though it probably lay close to the present field gate to the Abbey, where there are some earthworks of a rectangular building. The gatehouse had a single arch for wagons flanked by a pair of rooms for the gatekeeper. At first floor level it reduced to a single long chamber over the arch lighted by 15th century windows and with a triple niche for statues. The sloping roofs on either side had stepped gables, of a somewhat Scottish character.



*View of the gatehouse
by William Stukeley,
c. 1710-20*

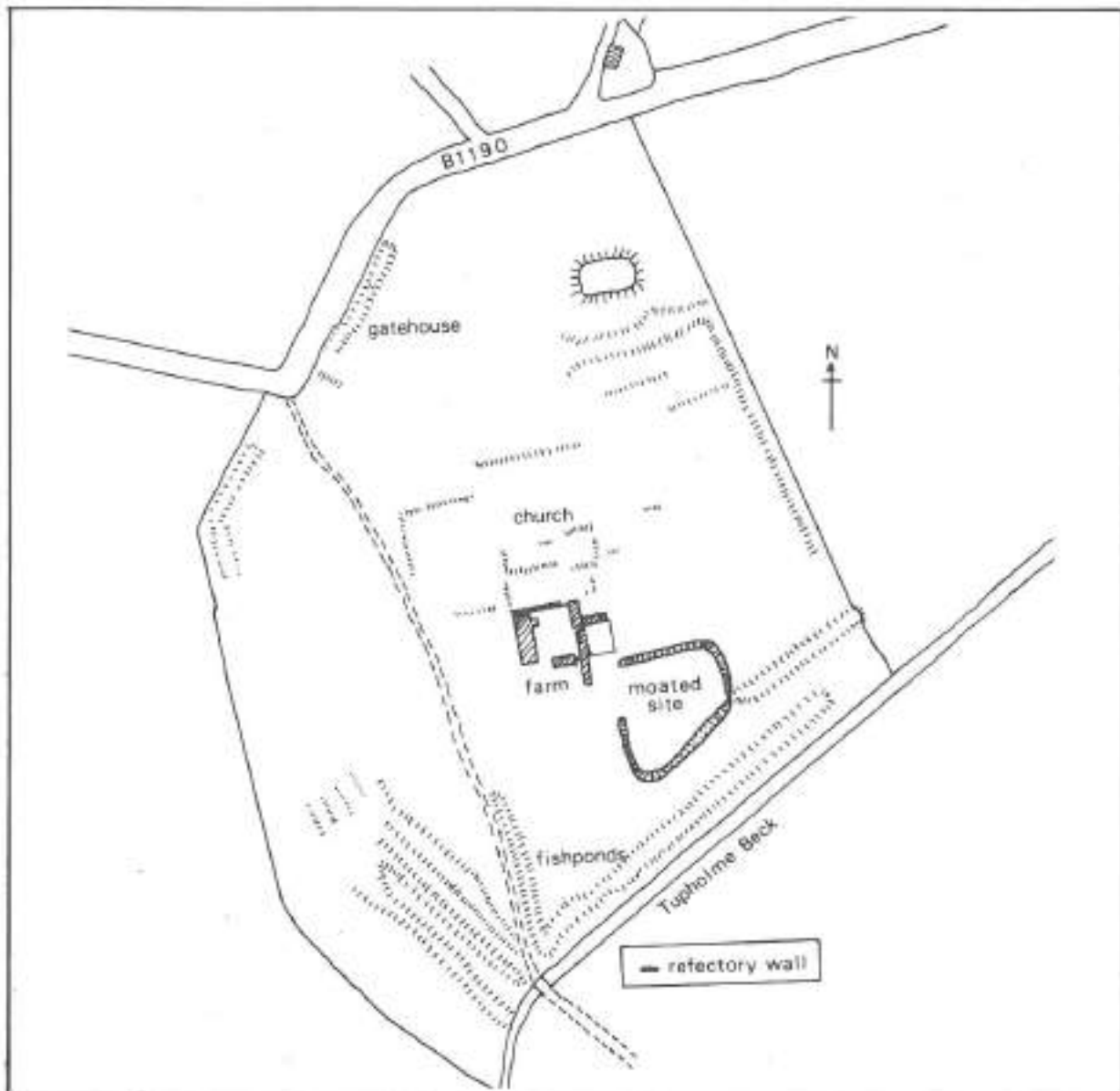
Various other buildings show up as earthworks, some of them quite substantial, but the plan is still by no means clear. The **Cloister** and the west end of the **Church** are marked by mounds and trenches where stone has been dug out, and a long building to the south of the **Refectory** and farmhouse can be made out on air photographs.

In 1791 John Byng visited the site, which he described thus:

'A pleasant ride thro' grass grounds (the gates of this day innumerable) and by woods, to near Tupholm Priory — whereof some small remains are attach'd to a farm house, a large venerable gateway. I went up to examine it; when the civil farmer came out, and observ'd to me that of the religious building the gateway only remain'd. . . . No, Sir (he said) I have lived here 60 years, and only remember this gateway: all this field was cover'd by buildings, and we now dig up great quantities of stone'.

Byng appears to have confused the two buildings as it seems unlikely that the **Gatehouse** was also attached to the farm, but from his description it is easy to see why the other buildings have gone so completely.

A later farmer, Mr. Pell, carried out excavations in the early 19th century for agricultural purposes in the Abbey yard and found quantities of bullocks' horn-cores, which tends to confirm the records of a 13th century Abbot who was accused of carrying on an illegal trade in horn.

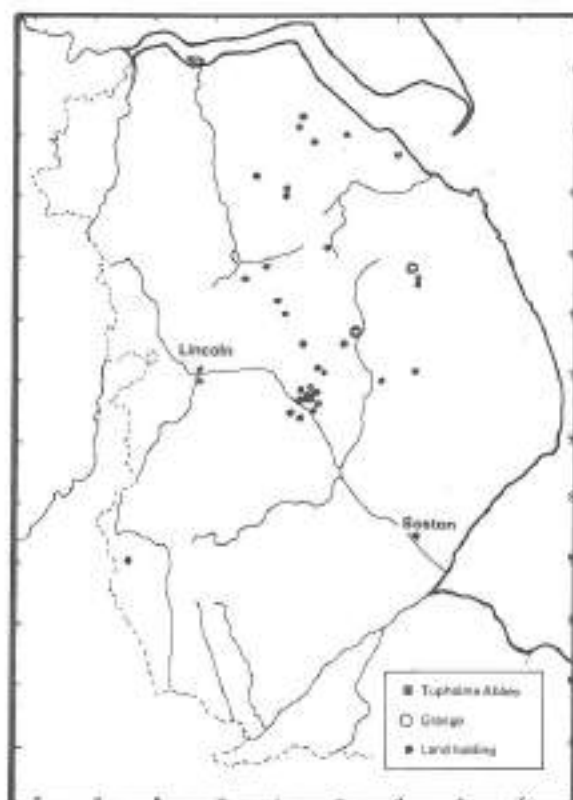


Sketch plan of the Abbey site, based on the evidence of aerial photographs

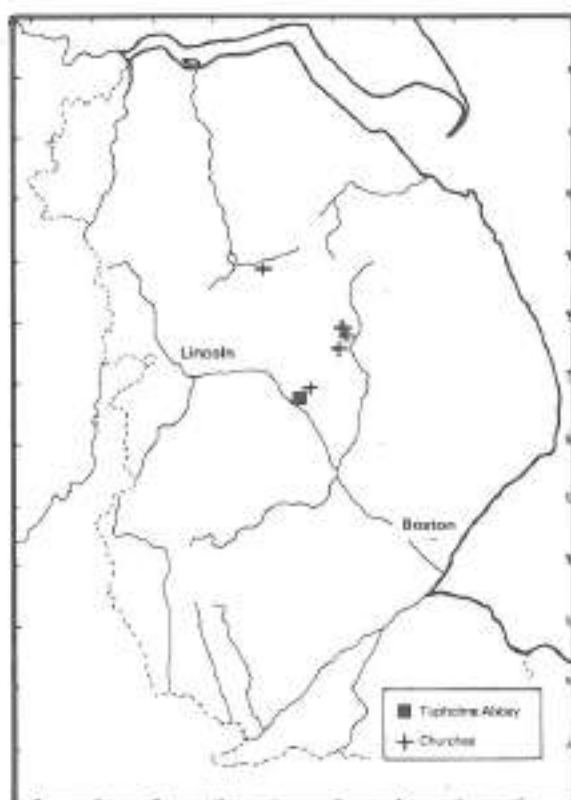
To the south-east of the Abbey is an irregular, roughly triangular, moated area covered with trees. Along its inner banks are traces of stone revetting but there is no evidence for buildings on the central island. It is not clear what the function or date of this site are, but it seems to be attached to the system of ditches which run around three sides of the Abbey precinct. Just to the south of the moat is a long depression running parallel to the old course of the Topholme Beck. This was latterly adapted for use as a series of sheep-dips but it is not impossible that a navigable channel ran up from the Witham to this point, a rise of no more than 3-4 feet (1 m). A charter of Henry III confirming a number of privileges granted by his father included the right to construct a waterway 'large enough for ships to come and go from the Witham as far as Topholme'. The remains of two fishponds join this channel close to its junction with the Topholme Beck, together with the ploughed-out remains of a double dyke defining the western side of the precinct.

ABBEY LANDS

In the Middle Ages land was the main source of wealth. Any monastic house would usually be given a grant of a site by a patron who expected to share in the prayers of the inmates and to be buried in a suitably prominent place in the Abbey church when he died. In addition the Abbey would be given land in its neighbourhood by a host of land-owners, large and small. These holdings it would supplement by purchase or persuasion, or by cultivation of marginal land until it had manageable blocks of land in key places. Topholme built up a concentration of land at Fanthorpe, near Louth, and at Ranby and established **granges** there, large farms of several hundred acres run by **lay-brethren** outside the usual manorial system. Elsewhere it had smaller holdings in over thirty parishes including the manor of Burreth, and mills at Nettleton, Ranby, Middle Rasen, Great Sturton, 'Shill', and 'Allymilne' (probably in Louth). Other possessions included a share in the fishery of 'Chakegard' on the Witham, owned by Stixwold Priory, and a fishery at Southrey, and five parish churches at Burreth, Middle Rasen, Market Stainton, Ranby and Great Sturton, two of which were regularly served by canons.



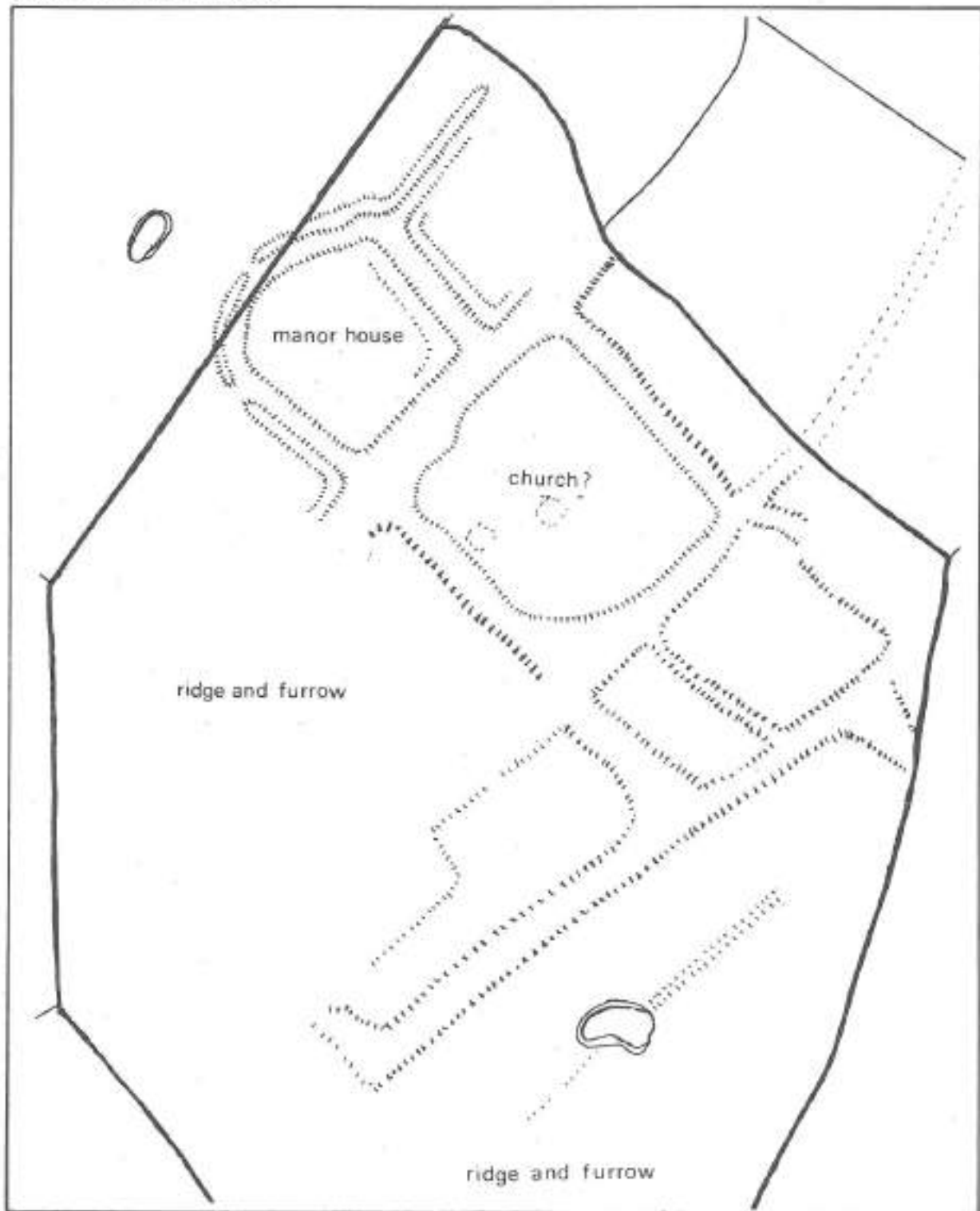
Map 1 showing distribution of Topholme Abbey lands and granges



Map 2 showing churches controlled by Topholme Abbey

Burreth, whose name does not occur on any modern map, lay about 1 mile (1.6 km) to the north of Topholme, and was one of its principal possessions. Like many other

villages in eastern England this once-thriving village with its church and manor house gradually shrank away to nothing. Twenty years ago substantial earthworks survived to mark the village streets and house platforms, but ploughing has removed much of the evidence in recent years. The parish priest died in the Black Death and no further priests were instituted after 1381, which probably signifies that the church was in ruins and the parishioners mostly gone.



Sketch plan based on aerial photographs of the deserted village of Burreth. Houses are marked by raised platforms separated by sunken lanes

Sheep-farming was important to Tupholme. In about 1300 it was selling 8 sacks of wool each year to Italian merchants, the equivalent of some 1,000 fleeces. Arable farming and cattle-ranching no doubt took place on much of its lands, particularly the holdings in the rich Witham Fens where wildfowling, fishing and peat-cutting could also be carried out.

The marsh called Middlefen in Metheringham was a valuable asset for these purposes, and the ownership of a **booth** in the Fen of the same parish suggests that servants were living here permanently.

THE AFTERMATH

As Tupholme had been valued at under £200 per annum in 1535 it fell under the first wave of Suppression in the following year. Unlike three of its neighbouring Abbeys Tupholme seems to have taken no part in the Lincolnshire Rising of October 1536; it was already empty. In 1538 the site was granted to Sir Thomas Heneage, but he does not seem to have lived here. John Leland, the antiquarian, writing at about this time says:

'Sir Christopher Willoughby's sun and heyre dwellith now at Tupholme Priory'.

William Willoughby had married Thomas Heneage's daughter Elizabeth, and no doubt they had been given the land by her father. It is possible that some of the Abbey buildings were adapted by them as a house, but later owners lived a short distance away at Tupton Hall.

The Abbey is scheduled as an Ancient Monument (County No.10) and lies on private land. Access is permitted, but please close gates and control dogs and children. Do not climb upon the ruins.

GLOSSARY

- Booth — Building in fen country, perhaps only used in summer
- Cellarer — Official responsible for overseeing the Abbey's estates
- Cloister — Covered quadrangle in which canons read, wrote, and walked
- Dormitory — Common bedroom, later often divided into separate rooms
- Lay-brethren — Senior manual workers who lead a semi-monastic life
- Refectory — Building in which canons ate together
- Rule — Monastic way of life, such as that laid down by St. Augustine

SOURCES

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Andrew White September 1979
County and County Museum
Lincoln



Lincolnshire County Council