

Archaeology Series No. 15

NOCTON PARK PRIORY



Fig. 1 View of Nocton Priory by William Stukeley, 1727
(reproduced by courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)

THE SITE

The site of the medieval priory of Nocton Park in the parish of Nocton, lies some 8 miles south-east of Lincoln, on the southern side of the valley of the River Witham. None of its former buildings now survives above ground, but the site of the priory is marked by an area of earthworks on a low rise, known as Abbey Hill, which overlooks the Witham Fen. Nocton Priory has long been known to historians and archaeologists, but little is known of its layout or buildings. One of the earliest surveys of the surviving earthworks to have come down to us is by the Lincolnshire antiquary, William Stukeley, who recorded in 1726, "I traced the Cardike round the outskirts of Sir William Ellys's park of Nocton; it runs near the site of the old priory, whose ruins are just visible . . . A well of the old Priory is well preserved, remarkably good water". His sketch (fig. 1) produced a year later, shows the site as it then existed, but even at this date nothing of the priory or the private house which succeeded it in the later sixteenth century, remained standing above ground. The modern plan of the earthworks carried out in 1979 (fig. 2) is not at all dissimilar to Stukeley's sketch, and it would seem that

the two hundred and fifty years, which have elapsed since the earlier drawing, have done relatively little to alter the appearance of the site. The position of the priory church as shown in Stukeley's drawing is perhaps partly the product of a reasoned interpretation of a complicated plan, but there is a possibility that sufficient of the church plan survived at that date to convince Stukeley of its correct position. The earthworks to the west of the church on Stukeley's plan are difficult to interpret in terms of the normal layout of similar religious houses, but part of the priory was converted into a private house in the late sixteenth century, and it seems likely that it is the remains of this house that Stukeley's drawing depicts in the foreground and middle distance. The house was later demolished, and rebuilt on a new site in the village of Nocton at the end of the seventeenth century. This house was destroyed by fire in 1834, and replaced by the present Nocton Hall.

The Priory buildings would certainly have been used as a quarry for suitable building stone for the late sixteenth-century house, and possibly for its late seventeenth-century successor. Indeed in certain areas of the site it is possible to see how walls have been robbed of their stone down to their footings by workmen trenching along the wall lines and throwing spoil up into low banks on either side. With the Priory having been used as a quarry for building materials over the years, it is perhaps not surprising that so little now remains. Until controlled archaeological excavations are undertaken here our understanding of the layout and plan of the Priory must inevitably remain restricted. Today the site is on private land with no public access, but the earthworks can be clearly seen silhouetted against the sky from the minor road between Nocton and Bardney which runs beside the Roman Cardyke through the hamlet of Wasps Nest. The site is now protected under the Ancient Monuments Acts as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

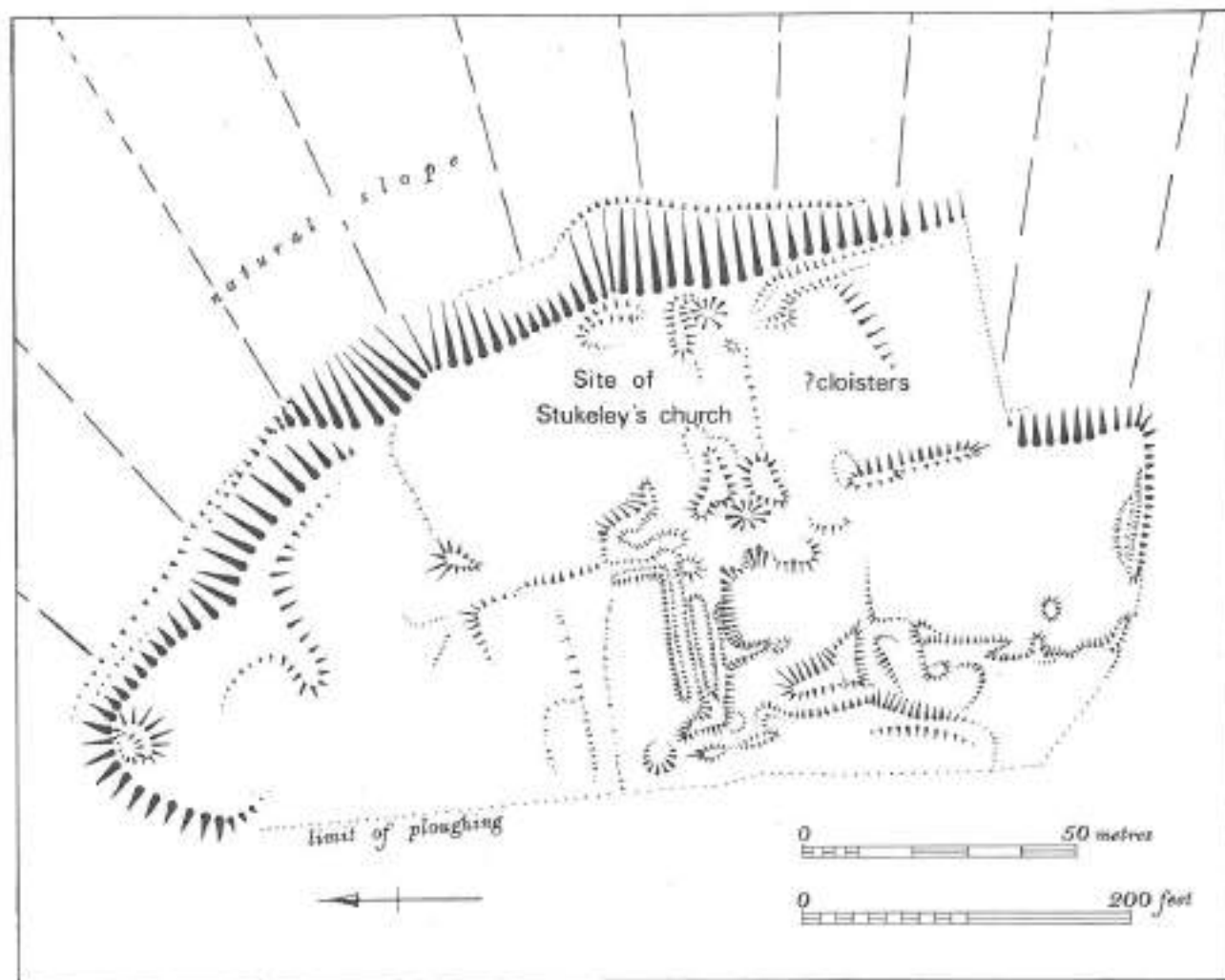


Fig. 2
Plan of the earthworks of Nocton Priory by T.M. Ambrose and P. Everson, 1979

EARLY HISTORY

The Priory of Nocton Park was founded in honour of St. Mary Magdalene for Canons of the Order of St. Augustine by Robert d'Arcy during the reign of King Stephen (1135-54). Robert d'Arcy was the son of Norman d'Arcy who had crossed to England from Normandy with William the Conqueror in 1066. The d'Arcy family is known to have owned extensive lands in Lincolnshire and South Humberside, which included the manors or estates of Nocton and Dunston. The history of the Priory during the early Middle Ages is thus closely linked with the history of the d'Arcy family, the members of which acted as patrons of and as benefactors to the Priory.

We can catch glimpses of the early history of Nocton Priory from the scattered documentary records of the period which have survived. Many of these are concerned with grants of land or buildings made to the Priory, the annual rents from which formed a large part of the Priory's income. But some show the successive priors in dispute with the d'Arcys and other landowners over their respective rights, and these give us an interesting insight into the problems which occasionally faced the house.

The ownership of the churches of Nocton and Dunston created one such problem in the early years of the thirteenth century. The two churches had originally been given to the Benedictine Abbey of St. Mary in York by Robert d'Arcy, the founder of the Priory. But sometime in the late twelfth century the churches were presented to the Prior and Canons of Nocton Park by Thomas d'Arcy, the founder's grandson or great-grandson.

The charter recording this grant states: "To all the sons of the Holy Church present and future, greetings from Thomas d'Arcy. Let it be known to you all that with the assent and consent of Joan my wife, and our heirs, I have given and granted and with the present charter confirmed to God and St. Mary Magdalene and to the canons of Nocton Park, the church of Nocton for the safety of my soul and the souls of all my ancestors". Perhaps not surprisingly the Abbot of York and the Prior of Nocton are found a few years later in conflict over the ownership of the two churches, and the "Prior of Noketon was summoned to show by what reason he had obstructed the presentation (of vicars) by the Abbot of York to the churches of Noketon and Duneston, and the prior's attorney came and said that the Abbot's presentation was justly obstructed . . ." The final outcome of the enquiry was that the Abbot's claim was refused, and the two churches remained the property of Nocton Priory.

Disputes over the election of a prior without the consent of the lord of the manor in his role of patron occurred in 1200 and 1297, and arguments and lawsuits as to the right and extent of common pasture occurred in 1202 and 1243. In 1243, Norman d'Arcy, after a lawsuit over the prior's right to common pasture, finally came to an agreement with him and also granted to "the prior and his successors . . . for every bovate (10-15 acres) of land which he has in the villages of Nocton and Dunston thirteen sheep, and moreover 120 sheep of the gift of the said Norman, for the soul of his father and mother and the souls of his ancestors and successors, in the pastures of the aforesaid villages". He further granted, "that the prior and his successors and their men of Nocton and Dunston can go by the road that leads between Nocton and Brothermilne which the prior and his predecessors and their men have used, for horses and carts, without hindrance of Norman and his heirs". (Prior Lane leading from Metheringham fen road alongside Nocton Wood to Abbey Hill may still represent this early road).

In 1315 we find the then prior, William Grimsby, complaining to the King that Philip d'Arcy "houses in his manor of Nocton several unknown men who have sworn to do all they can to damage and injure the said prior and his house, who daily seize the said prior's farm animals, including his plough-oxen, and do other damage to the extent that the priory lands remain unploughed and unsown; for which reason the said prior seeks for a remedy to be given to him". The King ordered a Commission of Oyer and Terminer to be set up to enquire why Philip Darcy, Hugh Darcy, and John de Swynford "together with others forcibly broke his (the prior's) close at Nocton park, co. Lincoln, fished in his stews (fishponds), mowed his

corn and herbage, and took his carts with the wheat, malt and other victuals that were in them, and also four mares of his yoked to the carts, and a horse of his of the price of £20, drove his cattle to divers unknown places, whereby the cattle could not be released and also took his cattle from his plough and his sheep . . . and for a long time detained them". In August 1316 after the Commission had sent its report to the King, the Prior was granted protection for one year, and no more is heard of the friction between Philip d'Arcy and the prior.

Legal disputes of this kind were common in the early Middle Ages and serve to demonstrate the importance to religious houses of their lands and property which were largely the mainstay of their existence.

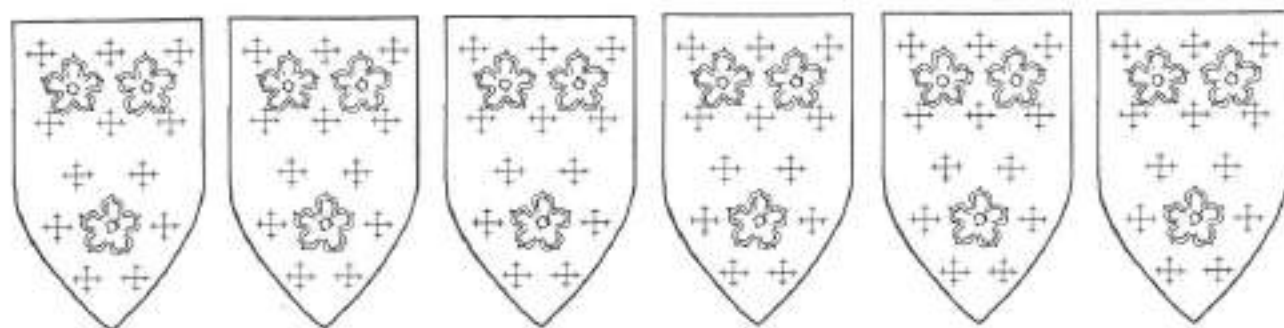


Fig. 3
The arms of d'Arcy

LATER HISTORY

In 1534 by the Act of Supremacy, King Henry VIII became the supreme Head of the Church in England. On 30th July 1534 Thomas Hornell, the prior of Nocton Park, John Trwe the sub-prior, and two canons Jacob Parke and Thomas Wyffyn signed the Acknowledgment of the Royal Supremacy, and in effect this sounded the death knell of the Priory. In March 1536, it was decreed by Parliament that all religious houses with fewer than twelve monks or nuns, and with less than £200 a year income should be closed, their possessions passing into the King's hands. Nocton Park, with an annual income of £60.6.0½d at this date fell into this category, and the prior and his canons were told to leave the priory before September 29th 1536.

Prior Hornell was granted a pension of ten marks by the Crown and his canons twenty shillings each. Hornell later became the vicar of Metheringham. In 1554 he is recorded as having a pension of £6.13.4d, which had been granted on the 2nd July 1537, and "he has another pension on what grounds is not stated of £4.16s granted 1st September 1548. He is vicar of Metheringham worth £8.0.8d per annum". His second pension derived from his acting as chantry priest of the chantry of St. Mary of Kirkby Green. Thomas Hornell, the last prior of Nocton Park died on the 16th of October, 1559.

In 1537 "the house and site of the suppressed priory of Nocton, Lincs., with certain land . . . a pasture in "le Fen" called a 'Bothe' and another pasture" was leased by the Crown for twenty-one years to Thomas Wymbysshe then lord of the manor of Nocton. The site together with Wymbysshe's lease was given by Henry VIII in 1538 to his brother-in-law Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, who acquired much ex-monastic property in the county. Whether the buildings of the Priory were immediately demolished by royal agents after September 1536 when the canons left, is not known, although many religious houses were at this time virtually razed to the ground after their fittings and goods had been sold off by auction. It is unfortunate that no records survive for Nocton Priory at this time, but it would be surprising if the house did not suffer a similar fate. In 1569-70, the Priory site was granted to Sir Henry Stanley, Lord Strange on the forfeiture of the Brandon family's lands to Queen Elizabeth, and he built a private house here, using the remains of the buildings of the old Priory. As we have seen above, it may well be that it is the remains of this house that figure in Stukeley's drawing

of 1727. The house was pulled down about a hundred years later, and about 1690 Sir William Ellys built the first Nocton Hall on the site its successor now occupies.

THE PRIORS AND THE CANONS

Houses of regular canons of the Order of St. Augustine first appeared in England in about 1100. By 1350 some two hundred houses had been founded in many parts of the country. The Canons of St. Augustine, or Black Canons as they were known from the colour of their distinctive outdoor cloaks, were similar to monks in that their lives were governed by a religious code or set of rules, although the Rule of St. Augustine was less strict in many ways than the Rule of St. Benedict which many monastic establishments followed. Their way of life was designed to inspire others to lead godly lives and to help others through prayer. Many of their houses were small and held few inmates, but the Order was nevertheless very popular and well respected among lay folk in the early Middle Ages. In Lincolnshire and South Humberside thirteen houses of Augustinian Canons were founded during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Houses of Augustinian Canons in Lincolnshire and South Humberside

	Founded	Dissolved
BOURNE	1138	after 1536
ELSHAM	after 1200	1536
HIRST	12th cent.	c. 1540
KYME	before 1169	1539
MARKBY	1154-89	1536
NEWSTEAD BY STAMFORD	before 1200-26	1536
NOCTON	1135-54	1536
THORNHOLME	1135-54	1536
THORNTON	Priory 1139 — Abbey 1148	1539
THWAITE	?	after 1536 (?)
TORKSEY	1154-89	1536
WELLOW	1123-33	1536

Alien Cell

HOUGH ON THE HILL	1164	c. 1414
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Most Augustinian houses were under the authority of the Diocesan Bishop and were regularly visited by him. His accounts of visitations and records of elections of priors provide valuable information as to the development and history of individual houses. Two visitation records are available for Nocton Park, both of which are of considerable interest, and help to throw some light on the personalities and lives of the canons.

In the autumn of 1440 the Bishop of Lincoln, William Alnwick visited the Priory. The prior and his four canons were each interviewed by the Bishop and their complaints to him about the running of the Priory and about each other are recorded in some detail. Three of the Canons complained about John Butylere, the bailiff of the house, one of the priory servants, who had been advising "the prior to sell the stock of the house at a cheap rate, and then they necessarily buy at a dearer price". One of the canons, Richard Bostone went even further; "John Butylere is useless, because the rumour is that he wastes the goods of the house in frequenting taverns, and while he had nothing when he took up his job, he is now extremely well off, and among ordinary folk he is known as the cellarer (estate manager) or subprior of the house".

The Bishop ordered the bailiff to be sacked, and "removed . . . with all convenient speed from the priory"!

Another canon Robert Lincoln complained that the buildings owned by the Priory in Nocton, Dunston and Metherringham "suffer great ruin due to lack of maintenance", and John Newerk stated that "the grange of Dunston is very ruinous in the prior's default, and likewise the building above the vault of the chapter-house, in so much that the rain falls upon the

vault'. The Bishop told the prior to repair these buildings "with all possible speed".

More serious was the accusation that Robert Hidelstone, a canon of Thornton Abbey staying in the Priory, was suspected of having an affair with Katherine Pymme of Bardney, and that this was not the first time that they had been suspected. Robert Hidelstone had been sent by his abbot to Nocton Priory, possibly on a temporary basis for disciplinary reasons, but had later been banished "by reason of his faults to a property belonging to St. Osyth's Abbey". He had returned to Nocton without permission and refused to leave. The Bishop decided that Hidelstone had "no right in the said priory, so as to be reckoned a canon there", and "sent him back to the house of his profession". Records of this sort allow us to see some of the problems the Prior and Canons faced, and in passing provide us with information often otherwise unobtainable.

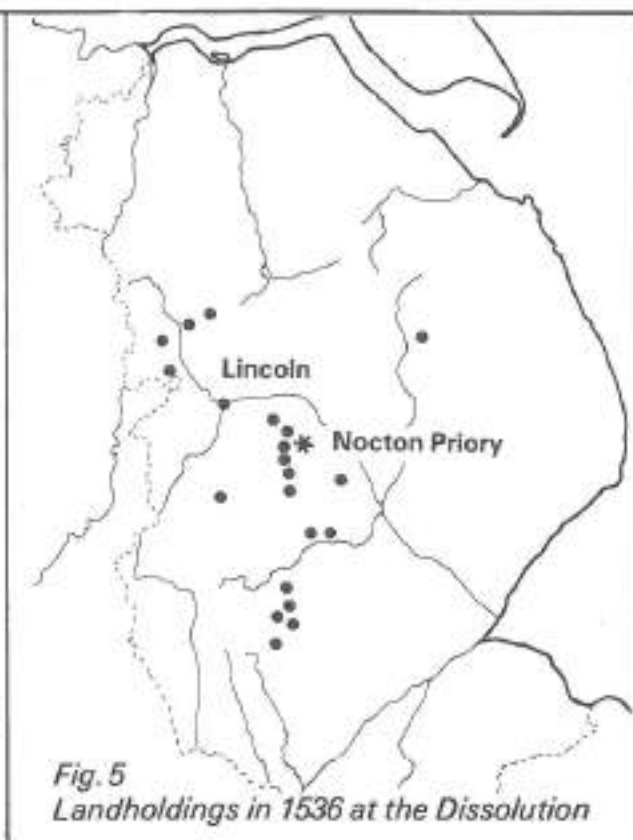
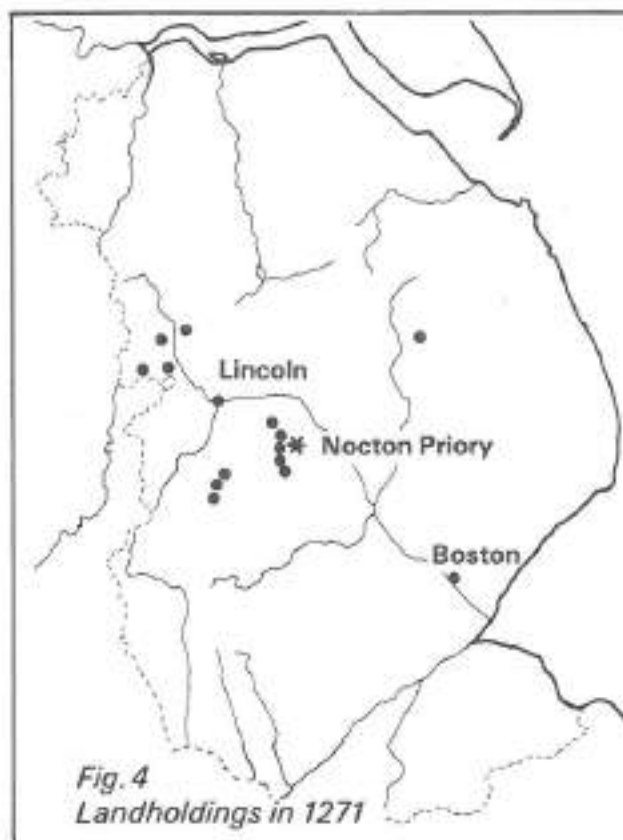
A late visitation of 1525 tells us that there were five canons in the house beside the prior at this date — John Fiskerton, James Butterwik, Thomas Lincoln, Edward Nettelham, Thomas Bardeney and the Prior, Richard Hanworth. Their surnames are all local village names, except for Butterwick near Boston, and may well reflect their origins.

The only problem facing the house seems to have been Edward Nettelham, variously described as "mente captus" (unbalanced) and "non pacificus neque quietus" (neither calm nor quiet) — qualities which are not likely to have recommended themselves to his fellow canons.

The number of canons always seems to have been small. In 1377 there were nine canons in residence, in 1381 seven; by 1440 only four canons and the prior remained, although the number of canons had increased to five in 1525. In 1534 the prior and three others signed the Acknowledgment of Henry VIII's Supremacy. The names of some twenty-two priors are known, many of them local Lincolnshire names. Records of their elections exist in the Bishops' Registers and often show the reasons for the election of a new head of the house. Richard of Yarwell, elected in 1276, left Nocton to become a Franciscan friar, as did his successor Hugh of Grimsby who resigned in 1293. Many resigned, although some died in office like Hugh of Dunston in 1349, possibly because of the Black Death. An interesting election of a prior occurred in 1286 when Richard Yarwell left to become a Franciscan. The canons first chose the sub-Prior Philip of Hanworth, but Bishop Sutton for technical reasons declared the election invalid. They next chose Arnold the cellarer (estate manager) of Thornton Abbey, but he declined to accept their offer for personal reasons, and finally the canons decided to ask the Bishop to elect a prior. Sutton after gaining the consent of Sir Norman d'Arcy the patron of the house appointed Hugh of Grimsby, a canon of Thornton Abbey. Gaining the consent of the lord of the manor in his office of patron was an important part of the procedure — as we have seen already, Thomas d'Arcy in 1200 and Philip d'Arcy in 1297 both complained that the Bishop had appointed a prior without their consent.

LANDS AND PROPERTY

The priory relied heavily on its lands and property for its existence. When Robert d'Arcy founded the priory he gave the canons "the site of the priory itself, and one messuage (house), and one carucate of land (80-120 acres) with appurtenances in Nockton, and the church of Caukewell". The rents from the house and land, and the tithes from the church went towards the maintenance of the priory. As we have already seen it was Thomas d'Arcy who granted the churches of "Noketone" and "Dunstone" to the priory, but he also gave "all the land, in plain, in wood and in meadow, which lies between the road running from the hedge of the park to the trench in the marsh; and between the outer ditch of the meadow of Heylescote on the north and the whole dayle of land near the site of the place Bergh as it has been marked out by the plough; and between Aldflete in the marsh on the east; and between the outer ditch of the park on the west". It is difficult to know what precisely this means, but it seems likely that this area of land surrounded the priory, 'the trench in the marsh' and 'Aldflete' (old water channel) perhaps both relating to the Cardyke. If this is correct, the wording suggests that the priory land known as the 'demesne' and the priory itself lay immediately outside the d'Arcys' 'park' rather than within it.



Grants of land from members of the d'Arcy family and others continued throughout the early Middle Ages. Lands given to the Priory in Nocton and Dunston, Potterhanworth and Metherringham, Branston, Cawkwell, Lincoln, Ingleby, Hardwick, Sturton-by-Stow, Navenby, Coleby and Boothby Graffoe and even Boston, are all recorded up to the year 1271, in a charter confirming the priory's holdings issued by Henry III (1216-1272). Some of the grants were small; "of the gift of William de Metherringham one and a half acres of land with appurtenances in Metherringham", or "of the gift of Robert de Metherringham a mill with appurtenances upon the water of Dunestone"; others were larger, "of the gift of Norman, son of Philip de Arcy the whole of his Bercary (sheepfold) opposite to his Grange at Noketone; 10 acres of land and a half with pasturage for 60 sheep". Many grants included houses as well as land, sometimes mills like the two in Dunston granted by Thomas d'Arcy, "one upon the water of the west and the other near the park", and occasionally animals. Some grants mention in passing other property — "of the gift of Robert, son of Robert d'Arcy, seven acres and a half of land with appurtenances in Noketon, and a mill in the territory of Dunston, and two selions (strips) of land, lying before the gate of the granary of the said prior and canons in the bruere (on the heath) "about which we would otherwise be ignorant. By 1291 the annual income of Nocton Priory was £46.17.2d much of this coming from the rents of property and land.

Land and property continued to be given in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In 1454 Nicholas Wymbyssh one of the clerks of Chancery gave a house in Chancery Lane, London to the Priory (later known as the Harfleur Inn), and in 1479 the manors of Osbournby and Water Willoughby were granted among other property by Thomas Wymbyssh, then lord of the Manor, and John Eyleston. By 1534 the priory's holdings were worth £60.6.0½d a year.

On occasions money rather than land was left to the house in wills — Margaret, the widow of Simon de Coleby onetime vicar of Nocton, left 6 pence to the Canons of Nocton Park in about 1270; Sir William Derham, vicar of Osbournby gave 'to the prior and convent of Nocton Parke 5 shillings' in 1528; Thomas Fowler of Potterhanworth left sufficient money for the canons to say thirty masses for his soul, in 1532. Even Bishops left money to the house — Bishop Hugh II of Lincoln left 1 mark to the 'Prior of Noketon' in his will in 1233.

The landholdings and properties belonging to the priory in 1271 and 1534 are shown on the two maps above (figs. 4 and 5). The geographical distribution of the property and land held in

the early Middle Ages is relatively restricted, with many of the priory's holdings being in the neighbouring villages. By far the greatest proportion was in Nocton and Dunston. By 1534 the picture had altered somewhat and the distribution is more widespread.

The agricultural economy throughout the life of the priory was based on mixed farming. Sheep played an important role in the earlier Middle Ages, with the priory exporting some 500 fleeces annually by 1300.

The fen or 'marsh' as it was known was extensively exploited in its undrained state for pasture, and fishing may well have been an important subsidiary activity. The priory had its own fishponds (raided by Philip d'Arcy in 1315) still shown on the Ordnance Survey map as two areas of wet ground between the priory and the Car Dyke on the east. The recent discovery of a medieval limestone net sinker at the far end of the parish by the River Witham may possibly represent the former existence of a priory fishery.

POSTSCRIPT

Although we can piece together something of the history of Nocton Park Priory from the surviving documents, much has inevitably been lost to us. No cartulary or register survives, and the documentary records often deal with the sensational rather than the day-to-day activities of the house. Occasionally we can glimpse personalities from otherwise dry records — John Butylere being rude to the canons, the canon from Thornton Abbey visiting Katherine Pymme in Bardney, Philip d'Arcy vandalizing the prior's property, but much has disappeared without trace, and the full story of Nocton Priory can never be told. But the site of the priory may perhaps one day yield up some of its secrets to archaeological investigation. Until then its protection and preservation is of paramount importance to those interested in safeguarding Lincolnshire's unwritten history.



Fig. 7
The arms of Wimbish

SOURCES

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