

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 17

SEMPRINGHAM PRIORY



Gilbertine canon (left) and nun (right)

INTRODUCTION

Almost exactly halfway between Sleaford and Bourne in south Lincolnshire and close to the Roman road known as Mareham Lane lies the site of Sempringham Priory. Today the ancient parish church of Sempringham stands isolated among the empty fields, accessible only along a narrow track which leads nearly a mile from the main road and the cottage where the key can be obtained. Under these fields lie the remains of Sempringham village, ruins of the Priory itself, and the site of the mansion begun by Lord Clinton after the suppression of the Priory and apparently never completed.

Of all this former activity almost nothing is visible and a casual visitor would be unlikely to

realise that monastic buildings of cathedral-like proportions once stood here and housed a community numbering, in its heyday, into several hundreds. This was the first home of the only religious Order which originated wholly in England; the birthplace and brainchild of one of the most remarkable men of mediaeval England, St. Gilbert of Sempringham.

ST. GILBERT AND HIS ORDER

St. Gilbert was born at Sempringham in 1089, the son of a local landowner. A physical handicap, the exact form of which is unknown, prevented him from taking up a career of soldier and landowner and so he took up that other mediaeval alternative, the life of a cleric. After several years' study in Paris he returned to his native village and set up a school, an uncommon step for those days and one which may explain the power which he later exerted over a whole generation of villagers. He also became rector of the churches which lay on his father's estates at Sempringham and West Torrington, although as he was not yet in holy orders he had to be specially instituted by the Bishop, Robert Bloet, to whose household he moved in about 1122 as a clerk. Under the Bishop's successor Alexander he became a priest and was licensed to hear confessions throughout the diocese of Lincoln. Returning once more to Sempringham some time before 1131 he found himself not only in possession of the church but also, since the death of his father, of much land.



*Sempringham
parish church,
from south-east*

From this point on we see the gradual beginnings of the Gilbertine Order. At no time does Gilbert appear to have intended to create a new order — it simply grew because it fulfilled a certain need. In the beginning seven of the village girls whom he had taught came to him with a desire to take up a life of religion; for these he built a **cloister** on the north side of the parish church, (the predecessor of the present church), where they could live together away from the temptations of the world. To serve their needs some of the poorer village girls were employed in providing them with food and other necessities which were passed through a window once each day, but Gilbert soon enrolled them as **lay sisters** on the model of the Cistercians, so as to avoid all contact with the outside world. Later on he added **lay brothers** whose duty was to carry out the heavy manual work. The growing community at Sempringham attracted much attention. In about 1139 Gilbert de Gant of Folkingham, Gilbert's feudal lord, granted him some 300 acres in Sempringham on which to establish a new monastery.

Not wishing to create a new Order, Gilbert approached the Cistercians, whom he much admired, but at their **General Chapter** at Clairvaux in Champagne in 1147 they voted against

accepting control of another Order, especially one of women. Gilbert did, however, enlist the support of the great Cistercian abbot St. Bernard in drafting the **Rule** of his new Order. Very soon **canons** were added to the Order to act as chaplains to the nuns and so the new monastery now contained both men and women in the religious and manual roles. Special arrangements had to be made in the Rule and in the layout of the building to keep them rigorously separated. Thus the Gilbertine Order was created.

In 1170 there was a rebellion among the lay brothers brought about by the harshness of the Rule. The 80-year-old Gilbert was hard put to it to resolve matters, complicated as they were by the intrigue and corruption in church affairs world-wide, but a solution was eventually found and a number of changes were made in the lay brothers' way of life in 1187. At Christmas time in 1188 Gilbert, now aged over a hundred, (if we are to believe his date of birth) was taken ill on one of his many travels, and was rushed back to Sempringham by his companions, where he died early in the following year. He was buried with great ceremony under the medial wall between the choirs of the canons and the nuns, where his tomb could be seen from both sides. Soon reports spread of miraculous healings occurring at his tomb and he was canonized by Pope Innocent III in 1202. In October of that year there was a great gathering at Sempringham when the Archbishop of Canterbury dedicated a chest for his relics, which was then set up above his tomb and rapidly became a focus for pilgrims (see Information Sheet No. 6).

Before his death, Gilbert had handed over the running of the Order to the Prior of the Gilbertine monastery at Malton (North Yorkshire). In future the head of the Order was known as the 'Master of Sempringham', and was elected by a group of thirteen selected Priors and Canons. He was not attached to any one house, but would spend much of his time in visiting every house in turn. Each house was a Priory, ruled by a Prior and three Prioresses (in the case of the houses which had both nuns and canons). The Rule made clear that the nuns were of the greater importance and that the canons were to be less concerned in the day-to-day running of the house. All novices entered the Order as a whole, rather than any particular monastery, and anyone could be moved around at will. This very centralized organisation, and the desire to escape the mistakes which other Orders had made, led to a very complex Rule, which runs even in the large 19th century edition of Dugdale's 'Monasticon' to some 94 pages.

Because of the respect they won generally and because they were a purely English order the Gilbertines were very popular with the Crown, though they never acquired great wealth due largely to the numbers in each community. As with most orders lay brethren almost totally disappeared after the 14th century, but there was an inheritance of immense buildings and a need for much labour which had now to be hired in.

Despite the apparent originality of St. Gilbert's Order it was really a conglomeration of ideas current at the time. The Cistercian ideals were very influential while the Order of Fontevault offered a parallel on the Continent to the idea of 'double houses'. Other 'double houses' were to emerge later among the Cistercians themselves, the Premonstratensians, and later still with the Bridgettines. In most cases, however, these were really houses of nuns with one or two chaplains attached.

Like the other Orders the Gilbertines had their own distinctive form of dress. The nuns wore a black habit with a white cap while the canons had black habits with a white cloak and a hood lined with lambs wool. The lay brothers and sisters wore more hardwearing and practical garments. Making, mending and washing of all the clothes was the responsibility of the women.

One canon of Sempringham did obtain a certain degree of fame in the literary world, however. His name was Robert Mannyng of Bourne and he produced an enlarged version, in English, of the 13th century poetic work called 'Manuel des Pêchés'. Mannyng called his version 'Handlyng Synne', and it was of an 'improving' nature with little stories to illustrate his points.



Arms of Sempringham

HISTORY

We have already seen the origin and early history of the Order, in which Sempringham itself played a leading role. A brief account must suffice for the later history, which has been told many times.

The Priory, from its humble origins, must have developed rapidly: after the death and canonisation of St. Gilbert it gained in importance and wealth as a centre for pilgrimage. Like other Lincolnshire houses it made much of its wealth from wool-trading. Being immune from customs the Gilbertines tended to act as agents for other traders, but this was checked by Royal commands on several occasions in the 13th and 14th centuries. Despite this Sempringham enjoyed Royal support for many years and towards the end of the 13th century was chosen as the home for Wencilian, infant daughter of Llewellyn, last native Prince of Wales, as a place where she would be well away from political influences. Here she died, an ordinary nun, 54 years later.

By 1291 the value of the Priory stood at £219.17s.11½d. and property was still being acquired. The rights to hold fairs at Stow Green (obtained in 1268) and at a place called Wrightbald in Gosberton parish (1293) provided a useful source of income. A number of churches were also acquired, some of these providing funds to support the large community of nuns, others to pay for the rebuilding programme at the Priory, begun in 1301.

The 14th century was marked by disaster for the Priory: a number of raiding expeditions were carried out on its possessions by jealous neighbouring landlords (though the Priory was not entirely innocent itself). Then came the Black Death in 1349. To add to the problems a great storm occurred on the eve of Trinity Sunday in the same year and the Priory church lay under 6-8 feet of water, while much damage occurred to the books and to 18 sacks of wool, almost a year's total production.

From the 15th century records survive, but the rebuilding of the magnificent church was by now complete. The years of growth and acquisition were over for the Gilbertines, as for most other orders. As they were visited and controlled by their own leaders we do not have records of visitations by Bishops as we do for houses of some of the other Orders. Many of the land-holdings were let out to laymen when falling numbers and rising prices made it uneconomic to farm all the estates by direct labour.

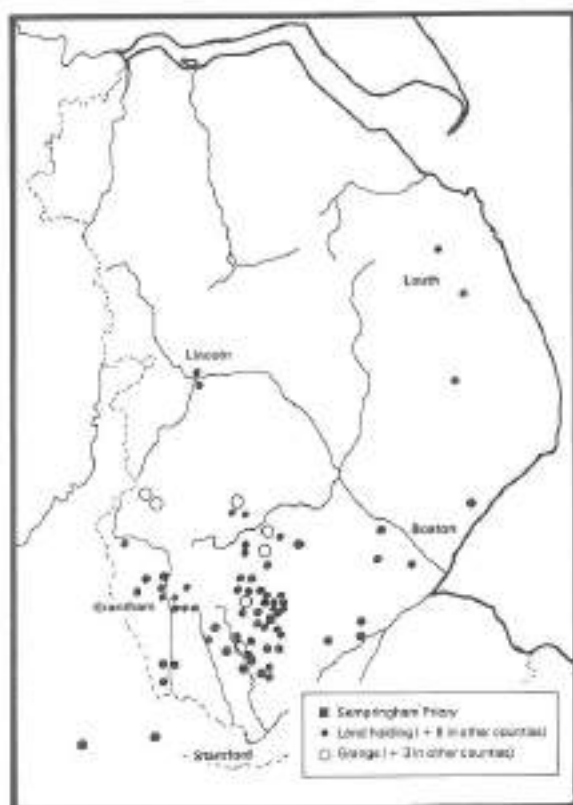
The number of canons too was considered to be falling too low: a general chapter held in 1501 resolved to begin a recruiting campaign. By the Dissolution this had already had some effect.

It would be interesting to know what effect the changing numbers had on the use of buildings: from other sites it is clear that as time went on buildings were abandoned and that brewing, baking, etc. had begun to invade the calm of the cloister itself, while a move from a fish and vegetable to a largely meat diet raised the importance of the kitchens.

POSSESSIONS

In the Middle Ages the only means of support for a large and unproductive monastic community was land in large quantities, to provide food and produce or, as time went on, money from rents and leases. People gave land and other property to the monastery in return for the

prayers of the community and for the future good of their souls, or occasionally to gain care and support in their old age. Many of the benefactors of the Gilbertine Order were small land-owners and their donations were correspondingly small. Sempringham eventually possessed land in 70 parishes, all but six in Lincolnshire, and heavily concentrated within a relatively small radius of the monastery. In addition there were seven mills, a very profitable source of income.



Map showing Priory lands and granges



Map showing churches belonging to the Priory

Larger blocks of land were farmed from **granges**. The Gilbertine grange was run by a **granger** and manned by lay brethren and consisted of a farm with communal living quarters and workshops, often surrounded by a wall or moat. Sempringham had ten such granges, some of great size. One at Fulbeck ran to 920 acres; a pasture known as 'le Shepegate' attached to Maidenhouse on the limestone heath on the east side of this parish was no doubt one of the sources helping to produce the 25 sacks of wool per year which Sempringham exported, equivalent to some 3,000 fleeces.

As we have seen the priory had the right to hold fairs on two of its manors, and these fairs must originally have been of great use in the exchange of produce from Fen and upland. Churches were seen as a useful source of income as they could command **tithes** (a tenth of all produce of certain types grown in the parish) and marriage fees etc. Sempringham eventually came to possess the staggering total of twenty churches whose income it absorbed and whose priests it instituted. Seven of these churches were outside Lincolnshire; but lying in neighbouring counties. Some were given for specific purposes, such as Fordham in Cambridgeshire, the income of which paid for the expenses of the annual Chapter, or the four obtained during the 14th century to assist with the cost of rebuilding the Priory church.

Despite all this revenue Sempringham was never a wealthy house, even though it was one of the wealthiest of its Order. The costs of maintaining 200 nuns and lay-sisters as well as perhaps 100 canons and lay-brethren in the early years was very great: later on although numbers dropped the community was beggared by its ambitious building-programme and by rapidly increasing labour costs, and in the 14th century the Priory was very often heavily in debt to the Italian merchants who had taken over from the expelled Jewish community as money lenders.

THE DISSOLUTION AND AFTER

In the 16th century the state of monastic affairs was very different from that of the 12th; numbers were greatly reduced, inflation was rising, and the monasteries were now regarded with some jealousy by much of the lay population. In addition grants of land had virtually dried up from the mid-13th century; indeed most monasteries were now unable to work the land they had because of the high cost of labour, and from the 15th century had begun to let the greater part of it out on long leases to yeoman farmers.

Not only was the economic basis of the monasteries challenged, but soon the religious basis also. In 1534 Henry VIII had himself declared supreme head of the church in England. A year later a general valuation was made of all church property and income with a view to royal taxation, but by 1536 the mood had turned towards dissolving the monasteries. At first it was only to be those houses which had an income of under £200 per annum, or which were small or very corrupt — a general visitation was made in 1536 to gather evidence of evil and corruption — but the inmates of these were allowed to move to the larger houses if they did not wish to give up their vows.

The Gilbertine houses were almost all poor — only four priories including Sempringham had revenues of over £200 a year — but they were allowed to remain, largely because of the influence of the Master, Robert Holgate, and the difficulties of finding other accommodation for the large number of nuns. However, nothing could save them in the long run; in July 1538 St. Katherine's Priory outside Lincoln surrendered and was followed in September by Sempringham and all the other houses. John Freeman, the Receiver for Lincolnshire, took revenues totalling £1,407 and sold off everything of value locally keeping only the lead, bells and precious metals for the King. At Sempringham the Prior, Roger Marshall, was given the rectory of one of its churches, Fordham in Cambridgeshire, and a pension of £30. Fifteen canons and eighteen nuns also received pensions, the Prioress having £5. Many of the canons had a chance of becoming parish priests, like their Prior; for the ex-nuns, unable to take any church posts, the future was bleak.

After the departure of the inmates the roofs were pulled off, windows knocked out and lead melted down into ingots. The priory church and cloisters appear to have been levelled fairly rapidly, though some of the domestic buildings were allowed to remain. The site of the Priory and many of its possessions were granted to Edward Fiennes, Lord Clinton and Saye, who appears to have set up in residence here. Other former lands of the Priory were purchased by William Riggs, a local man who was also a member of the Court of Augmentations, and Robert Carr, an up-and-coming member of the local gentry.

The later history of the site was to a certain extent revealed by the excavations of 1938-39 but Richard Gough, in his revised version of Camden's *Britannia*, writes:

'(Sempringham was) granted to Edward lord Clinton, whose seat here was entirely pulled down by the late duke of Newcastle before he sold it to lord Fortescue; the garden walls remain. The priory stood to the North East of the church; only a bare site remains, and a moated area . . .'



Arms of Edward Lord Clinton

Even at this date the site stood completely open and the exact position of the Priory was unknown; the parish church began to be confused with it and it was not until 1938 that the remains were finally located. Much of the stonework had been robbed for building purposes or broken up as hard-core. John Byng, writing in 1791, and referring to nearby Threkingham,

says:

'Over the doorway of his granary Mr C(ragg) has placed a fine porch, brought from Sempringham Abbey; whose curious stonework he said, had repair'd many a rut'.

EXCAVATION

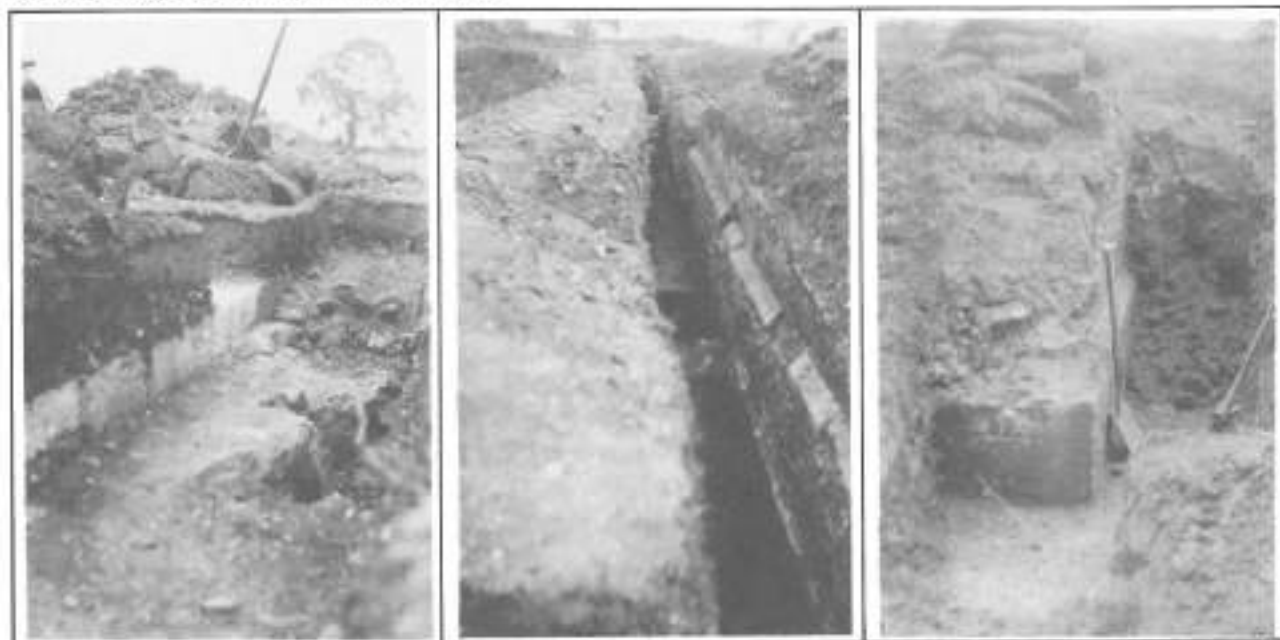
In 1938 excavations on the Priory site were begun by the Lincolnshire Archaeological and Architectural Society under the direction of the distinguished architectural historian Hugh Braun. Four men were employed as diggers, and Miss F.E. Mann of Horbling acted as Treasurer and Secretary of the excavation, as well as being present on the site all the time: — Mr Braun apparently paid visits from time to time to observe the results.

The method of excavation adopted was that of digging down to a wall and then following it up. If the wall proved interesting it was followed, if not that particular trench was discontinued. The remains of both Priory and domestic buildings proved to be heavily robbed for their stone, which made planning extremely difficult with the primitive excavation methods used. We now know that some at least of the domestic buildings were of timber construction; these would have been entirely missed by the excavators.

Discarding the 'traditional' site near the parish church Braun commenced operations in the area south of the Marse Dyke, the watercourse which drains the slight valley between the church and the three-sided earthwork to the south. He tackled two main areas; that to the east produced evidence of a substantial mediaeval building which the results of recent field-walking suggest may have contained a kitchen — large quantities of animal bones and shells were observed here in 1978. The area to the west of this proved blank, but further west still were several mediaeval buildings incorporated, Braun thought, into a 16th century building consisting of three ranges lying around a courtyard. There was no satisfactory differentiation of date between the various buildings, however, and they may not all have been in use simultaneously. A plan drawn from more recent air photographs suggests that Braun had located the northern parts of one of the domestic ranges perhaps including the Prior's lodging, though it is not clear whether the canon's cloister lay to the north or south.

Most of the finds came from this area: much painted window glass, pottery, coins, tiles, and two oyster shells used as paint-pots, probably for wall-paintings.

In the last few days of the 1938 season attention was turned to the area of the standing earthwork — the earthwork itself had already been sampled — and here were found some massive walls belonging to the Priory church.

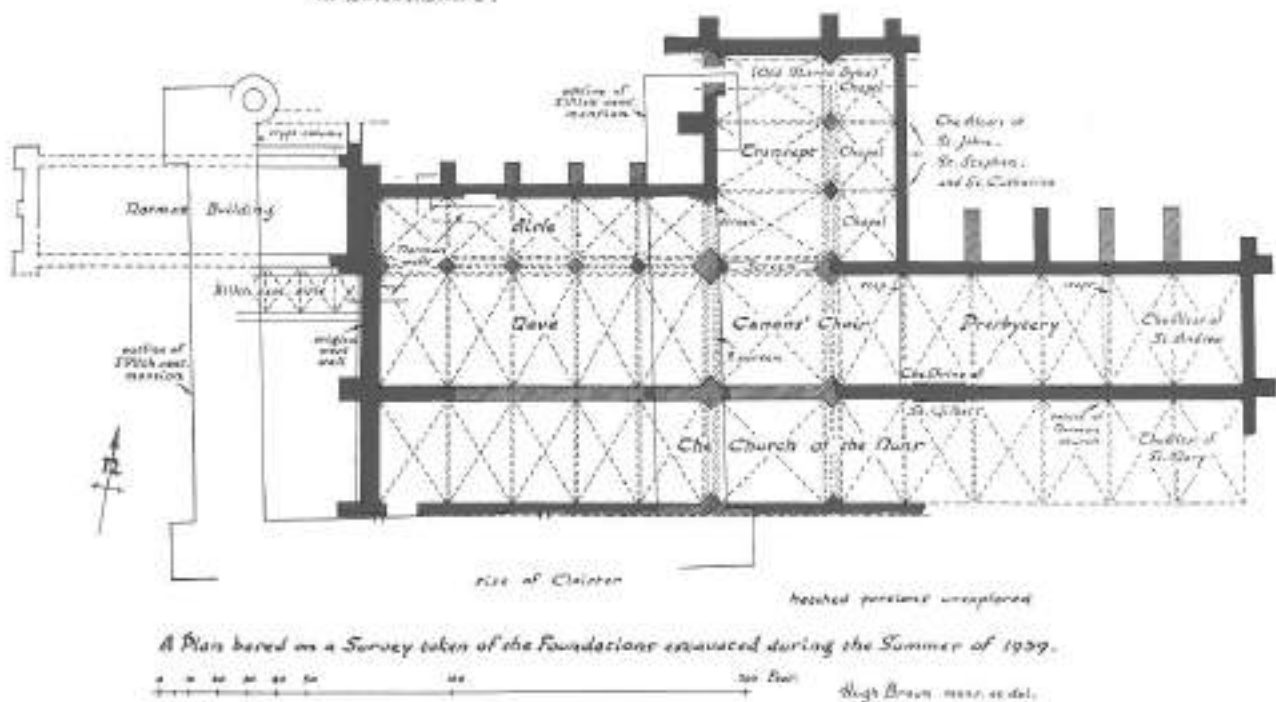


Three views of Priory excavations, 1939 (Mr S G Nash)

Excavation was renewed in June 1939 with three men employed full-time as well as a number of volunteers. One of the volunteers was Mr S.G. Nash, who now lives in Somerset. He salvaged some of the finds which would otherwise have been ignored – the architectural plan was recovered at the expense of any archaeological considerations – and in 1978 presented them to the City and County Museum.

As indications had been found in 1938 that the Priory church lay in the vicinity of the visible earthworks this area was examined in more detail. The earthwork proved to be the remains up to plinth level of a large house lying around three sides of a courtyard, with a circular tower at each angle. It was thought that the house had never been finished as no roofing tiles or paving for the courtyard were discovered. However, the dismantling of the house and subsequent use of its walls and courtyard as a garden feature could easily have removed the evidence. It is a great pity that no photographs or detailed plan of the house survive to enable these conclusions to be checked.

The Priory Church of Sempringham, in Lincolnshire.



Plan of Priory obtained from excavations in 1939 (by permission of British Archaeological Association)

Below the house lay the remains of the church, or rather two successive churches. To the west was a 12th century building flanked by an aisle to the south and a crypt, (later disused) to the north, probably below an equivalent north aisle. Further east this early church only survived as fragments where the 14th and 15th century rebuilding on a massive scale had incorporated them. This rebuilding, as revealed by excavation, created a church some 325 feet (100m) long with two parallel naves and presbyteries, for the nuns and canons respectively. To the north of the twin nave was a buttressed aisle (the north wall of the presbytery was also heavily buttressed) and a large north transept containing three chapels. The two parallel churches were divided all the way down the middle by a solid wall, thought to have risen to the full height, which carried the vaulting of the two roofs. In the fifth bay from the east a section of earlier walling survived in an area of the central wall specially thickened, probably to carry the shrine of St. Gilbert. The north transept had been extended across the line of the Marse Dyke, which had been diverted to accommodate it. To the south rebuilding was constricted by the range of domestic buildings which lay against the church, and which presumably remained unaltered.

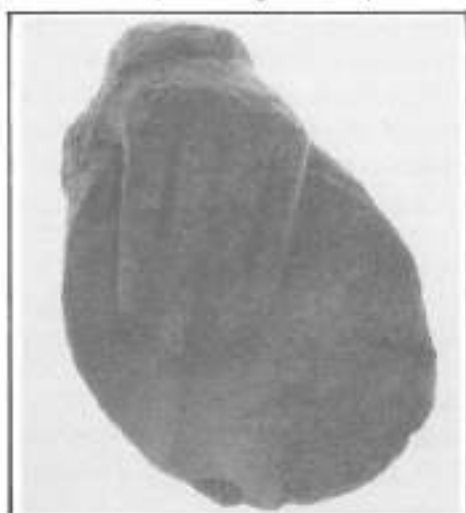
Magnificent and financially ruinous though the later church was, it is clear that the Norman church was also of considerable size as indeed it needed to be when the original community was so large. The later rebuilding must have coincided with the rapid decline in numbers

during the 14th century: it is possible that the reason for the rebuilding was as claimed — the condition of the Norman buildings. The very heavy buttressing was no doubt designed to protect the building from being undermined by the flooding which was a feature of the site.

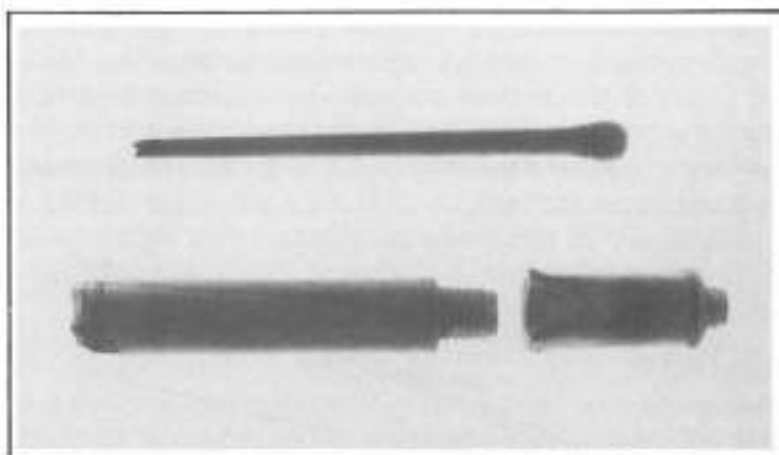
Further excavations were proposed, but these were prevented by the outbreak of war and were never resumed.

THE FINDS

Considering the extent of the excavations the surviving finds are very few in number and do little to illustrate the daily life and economics of the monastery. Some of the more important pieces are illustrated here. Among the excavated finds in Grantham Museum are a number of coins and tokens from the 1938 area just south of the Marse Dyke, together with some painted glass and the oyster shell paint-pots described above. A number of other finds undoubtedly belong to the post-Dissolution house.



Carving of hand holding a pyx



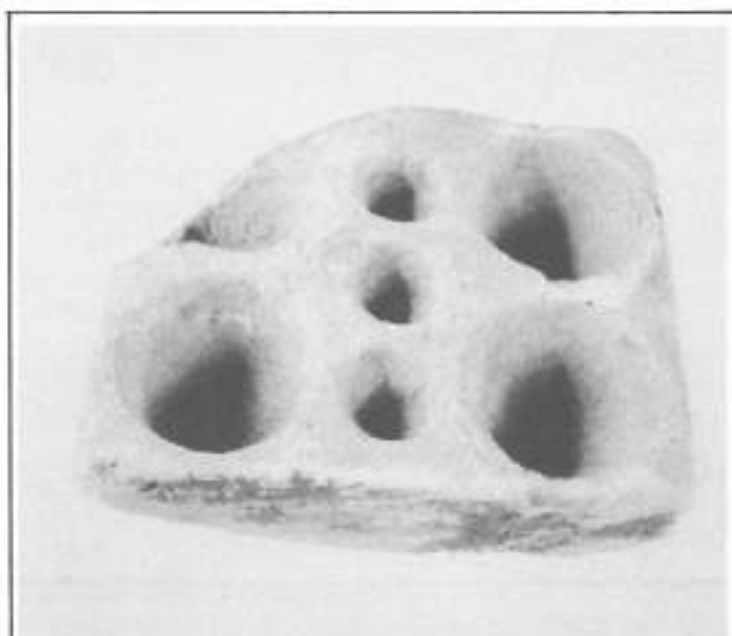
Bone pin and etui, probably from the post-Dissolution house

From the Priory church itself come a fragment of a small statue holding a flat circular object described as a 'pyx', found in the north-west corner of the north transept, and a lead disc bearing a large letter 'M' from the north aisle.

Most of the carved stonework was taken to the churchyard, where it now lines the path. A stone coffin found reused as a trough in the area just south of the Marse Dyke is now inside the church. Two carved details, one representing foliage and the other a crouching lion, found reused as a cover to a post-Dissolution drain, do not appear to survive.



Grotesque head

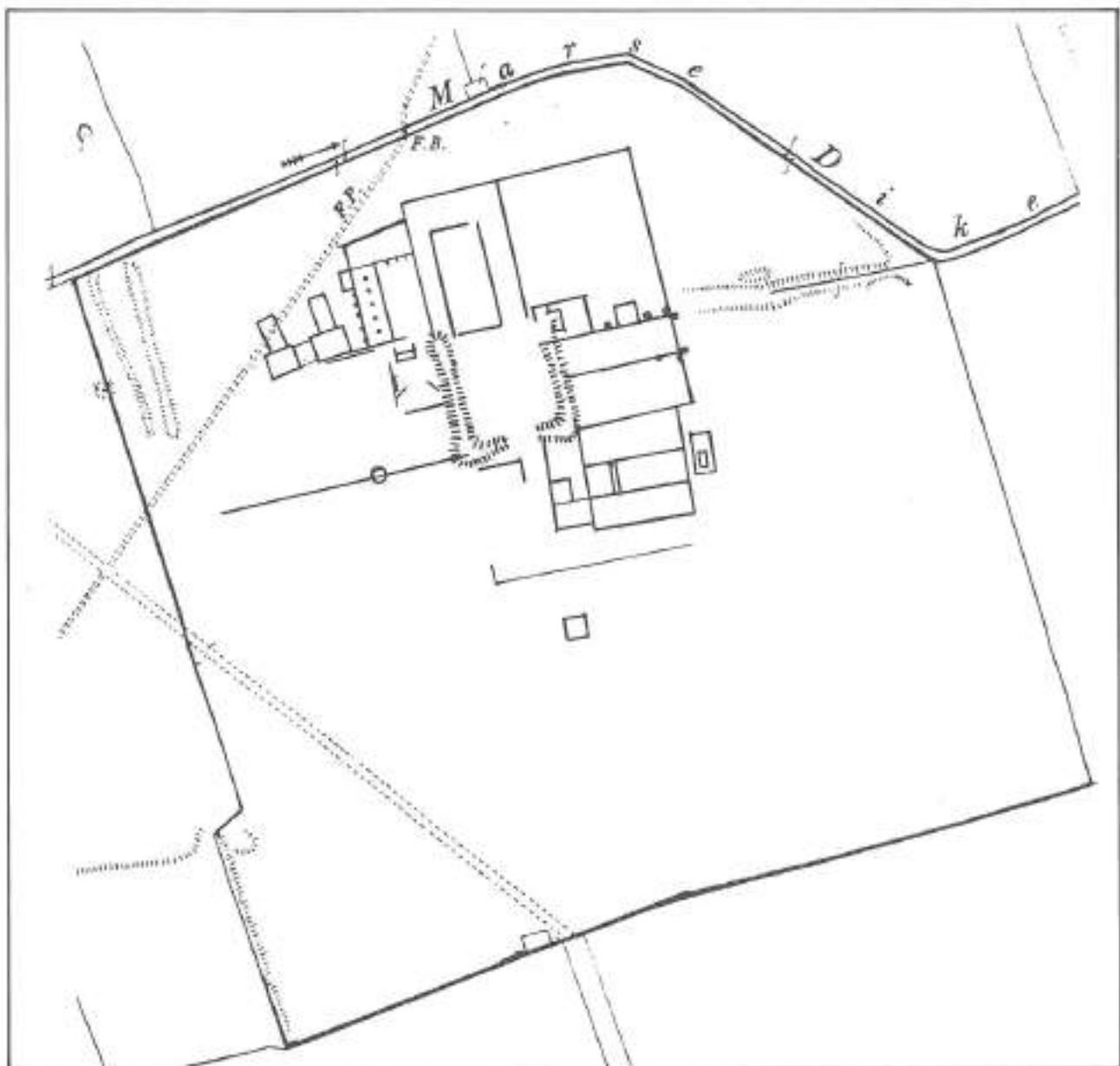


Cresset stone, used for lighting

One of the most interesting pieces of stonework, the findspot of which is unfortunately not recorded, is a cresset stone — a flat block with a series of recesses in the surface which held oil and floating wicks to light the church. Also from unrecorded findspots but probably the northern domestic range are a large number of pieces of well-preserved painted glass, collected by Rev. Hearn, and now in the City and County Museum.

THE PLAN

Only two Gilbertine monasteries have been fully excavated; the double house at Watton (Humberside) and the small house of canons only at Mathersey, (Notts.). Several others show something of their plan from the air, where the development of crops is stunted over buried walls and enhanced over ditches, or where stonework shows up as differential colouring in ploughsoil. Parts of the plans of Bullington (Lincs.) and Sempringham itself show up in these ways. It must be remembered that not all buildings were of stone, however, nor would their remains necessarily show up from the air. In 1534 a **corrody** was granted at Sempringham to John Smythe in return for his services as organist. He was to have a dwelling house in the East Court of the monastery with money, food and drink, and pasture etc. for sheep and a horse: the house is described as being of 'mud and stud' construction, like many Lincolnshire buildings of its day. No doubt most of the buildings outside the cloister were of this type.



Plan of buildings as sketched from aerial photographs

What does show up clearly is the existence of other buildings beyond those excavated. The church with its massive north transept appears running out below the earthworks to east and west. East of the north transept is a small building not located in 1939 and to both north and south of the east end is the line of a wall, apparently marking off the inner precinct. South of the church is a complex of buildings which perhaps form one of the cloisters, while to the north is another range of buildings probably forming the other cloister. This range seems to run into the area of the 1938 excavations, and Braun may have confused this with the post-Dissolution house he claimed to have found. Further west several more buildings can be traced, including one running north and south, buttressed on one side, and with a central row of columns to support vaulting. Little or nothing can be made out to the west of the church where a gatehouse and domestic buildings might be expected. An elaborate series of fish-ponds fed by the Marse Dyke lie in this area and drainage operations in 1978 here were watched by members of the South Lincolnshire Archaeological Unit and revealed a number of wall footings as well as pottery, a fish-hook and a brass letter from a monument.

It is clear that the plan adopted at Watton was not the only Gilbertine plan and may have been used because of the particular nature of the site. At Bullington and Sempringham the cloisters seem to lie on either side of a large church instead of forming two separate groups lying to the east and west. As perhaps only the later phases of the site's history show up, however, a different layout may have been used in the 12th century. Further excavations at Sempringham, under modern conditions, would serve to disentangle some of the problems and would in any case be highly desirable as the Priory served as a model for many of its daughter houses.

THE GILBERTINE HOUSES

By no means all Gilbertine houses were double; many were of canons only, and some were very small. The Order never spread beyond England and was largely confined to the East Midlands, with a few outliers.

Double Houses	Founded
Alvingham, Lincs.	1148-54
Bullington, Lincs.	1148-54
Catley, Lincs.	1148-54
Chicksands, Beds.	c. 1150
Haverholme, Lincs.	1139
North Ormsby, Lincs.	1148-54
Sempringham, Lincs.	c. 1131
Shouldham, Norfolk	c. 1193
Sixhills, Lincs.	1148-54
Tunstall, Humberside	c. 1164 (united to Bullington before 1189)
Watton, Humberside	1150
Canons only	
Bridge End (Holland Bridge), Lincs.	c. 1200 (became a cell of Sempringham after 1445)
Cambridge, St. Edmund's	1291 (house for students)
Clattercote, Oxford	1148 (leper hospital for Order, later Priory)
Ellerton, Humberside	c. 1207 (hospital attached)
Fordham, Cambs.	c. 1227 (hospital attached)
Hitchin, Herts.	1361-2
Lincoln, St. Catherine's, Lincs.	c. 1148 (hospital attached)
Malton, N. Yorks.	1150 (3 hospitals attached)
Marlborough, Wilts.	c. 1189 (hospital attached)
Marmont, Cambs.	c. 1203 (cell of Watton in 1535)
Mattersey, Notts.	c. 1185
Newstead-on-Ancholme, Humberside	1171
Poulton, Glos.	1350
Ravenstonedale, Cumbria	c. 1200 (cell of Watton?)
Stamford, Lincs.	1292 (house for students, closed by 1334)
York, St. Andrew's, Yorks.	c. 1200

It will be seen that many of the houses of canons had hospitals attached to them. These would have been run by lay sisters. Two minor establishments were at Cambridge and at Stamford (where an attempt was made to secede from Oxford University in the late 13th and early 14th century). The former certainly and the latter possibly was set up as a hostel for canons of the Order studying at the University.

GLOSSARY

Canons — Priests following the Rule of St. Augustine.

Chapter — A meeting of all the members of a religious community.

Cloister — Open square surrounded by buildings.

Court of Augmentations — Government department concerned with management and sale of monastic lands.

General Chapter — A meeting of heads of all the houses of an Order.

Lay Brother (or Sister) — Man or woman who took certain monastic vows but carried out manual work.

Mud and Stud — Wood and clay infilling of walls in buildings usually of timber construction.

Order — A group of religious houses following a particular version of a Rule.

Pyx — A small box containing relics or holy sacrament.

Rule — A way of monastic life, as specified e.g. by St. Benedict.

Visitation — Visit by a Bishop or another Abbot to control and criticize the running of a monastery.

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