

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 22

MAGDALEN COLLEGE SCHOOL, WAINFLEET



N.W. View of WAINFLETE'S SCHOOL, at WAINFLETE, Lincolnshire.

North-west view of Magdalen College School in 1790 engraved by Basire from a drawing by Schnebbelie. Society of Antiquaries of London.

Wainfleet is a small attractive town on the Lincolnshire coast about 5 miles (8km) south of Skegness. Formerly of much greater importance with a market and a thriving port in the Middle Ages it has suffered the fate of many such ports on the East Coast: the sea has receded. The Haven which acted as a safe anchorage for ships of many countries is now marked by a marshland river which enters the North Sea at a point some 2 miles (3.5km) from Wainfleet.

But Wainfleet still preserves its greatest treasure, the splendid red-brick school begun in 1484 by William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester, in his native town, a school which was designed to provide scholars for the Bishop's new foundation in the University of Oxford — Magdalen College.

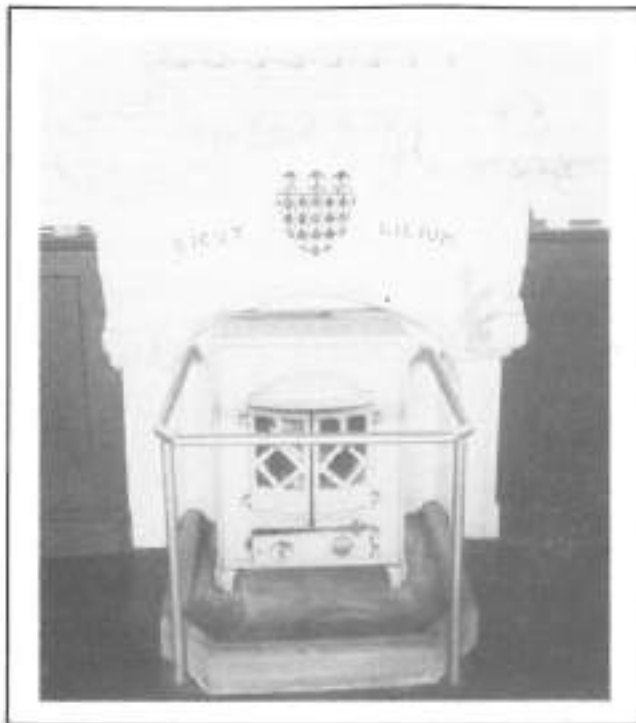
BISHOP WAYNFLETE

William Patten, a native of Wainfleet, was a powerful force in 15th century education. Headmaster of Winchester, and perhaps also Provost of Eton, he later became Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor of England. He used his influence to save Eton College from Edward IV and in his later years founded Magdalen College, Oxford, and two schools to feed it at Magdalen itself and at Wainfleet. Like many clerics of his age he took as his surname the name of his birthplace, in which he clearly maintained a great interest. His father, Richard Patten was buried in Wainfleet All Saints old church, and his son erected a splendid monument to him. This suffered much damage when the old church was demolished c1820 and the monument was later moved to Magdalen College, Oxford.



Engraving of the monument to Richard Patten in 1790, prior to the demolition of Wainfleet All Saints Church, engraved by Basire from a drawing by Schnebelle. Society of Antiquaries of London.

Waynflete was one of a powerful circle of men during the devastating Wars of the Roses and survived largely because of his wealth and political ability. He was executor of the estates of Ralph, Lord Cromwell, who died in 1456, and oversaw the completion of Cromwell's new brick castle and college at Tattershall. Later on he was to use the services of John Gybur, the Warden of Tattershall College, to act as his agent in the building of Wainfleet school. The connection with Cromwell is an interesting one, as Cromwell's advocacy of brick as a building material must have influenced the use of it in the new school.



The arms of Waynflete on a 19th century fireplace in the upper room.



Bishop William Waynflete, from a contemporary manuscript.

Waynflete died in 1486; his effigy appeared in the stained glass in the school windows along with his coat of arms, three silver lilies on a chequered shield of black and white, and the Five Wounds of Christ, a piece of religious symbolism dear to Waynflete's heart. Lilies also appeared in individual glass quarries in other windows. All this was swept away before 1755. All the heraldry and symbolism that survives today is contained in some glass and the two 19th century fire-places in the upper room decorated with the Waynflete arms (borrowed from the arms of Eton) and the mottoe 'Sicut Liliun', a reference to the lilies on the coat of arms and the biblical phrase from the Song of Solomon 2.2, in the Latin of the Vulgate;

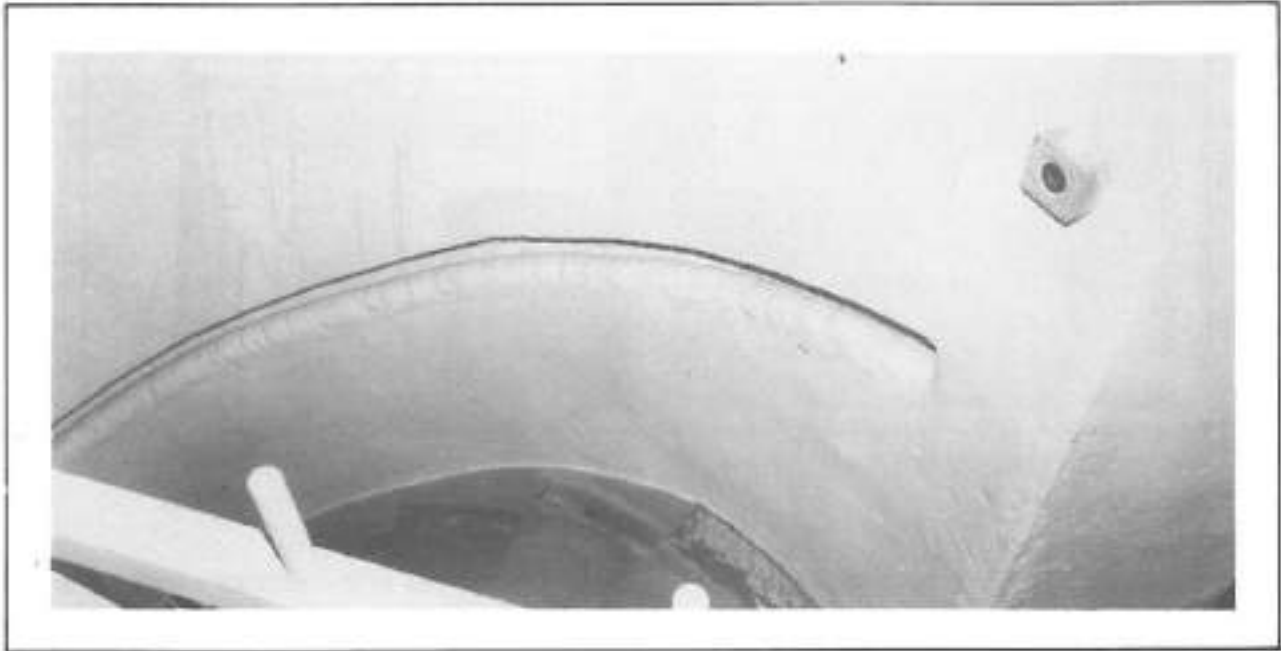
'Sicut lilium inter spinas
sic amica mea inter filias'
(*'Just as the lily among the thorns so is
my love among the daughters of men'*)

USE OF BRICK

Brick was occasionally used as a building material in the 13th and 14th centuries, and can be seen at Hull in Holy Trinity Church or at Thornton Abbey (Humber-side) where the gatehouse is of brick with stone dressings. It was the 15th century, however, that saw the greatest growth in brick building, especially in the Eastern Midlands.

It is often said that brick was cheap material and required less skill in the laying than stonework. Brick could, it is true, be produced wherever suitable clays or shales occurred, but considerable quantities of brushwood would be used in the firing, and it is clear that this was often hard to obtain and expensive. Furthermore the very complex details often obtained in brickwork were clearly highly skilled work, and this was a totally new range of skills. The men responsible for the new brick buildings from 1430 onwards were among the richest and most powerful in the country; Henry VI at Eton College, Ralph Cromwell at Tattershall Castle and College, Sir John Fastolf at Caister Castle, and Bishop Waynflete at Esher Palace, Farnham Castle, and Wainfleet School, Lord Hastings at Kirkby Muxloe Castle, and Bishop Rotherham of Lincoln at Buckden Palace. Within a period of fifty years many brick buildings were constructed by this small group: towers and gatehouses, colleges and schools. Many of the buildings were clearly designed to display the wealth and prestige of their builders, and cheapness of materials was a minor consideration to such magnates.

Not only did the members of this group know each other: they frequently seem to have employed the same master masons. A mason named John Cowper may have gained experience at Tattershall Castle under a foreign master, but he later worked at Esher Palace for Bishop Waynflete and at Buckden Palace for Bishop Rotherham and is a strong candidate as the designer of Wainfleet School, which is based in part on Esher. He also appears in the 1480s at Kirkby Muxloe Castle as master mason. Building accounts survive for Tattershall and Kirkby Muxloe and serve to show the expense and complexity of the work.



Moulded brick handrail on the spiral staircase in the north-west tower.

Huge numbers of plain bricks were required for walling – the laying of these was probably semi-skilled work – but the creation of vaulting, door and window mouldings and staircases was highly skilled, and called for purpose moulded or cut bricks which would have to be shaped on the site. At Wainfleet the doors, windows and spiral staircase all had specially cut and moulded bricks, and the latter also had a cut-brick handrail set in the wall. Walls were built solid, that is to say that there was no rubble core in the middle, and the octagonal towers at the west end needed specially cut bricks to form the outer angles; axe marks can still be seen on



Diaper work using specially fired bricks decorated with green fused sand.

some of these. Additional decoration was given at the west end by the use of diaper patterns using special bricks decorated with fused sand, the glassy green ends of which contrast with the soft red of the walling. Traces of further glazed bricks appear at the east end and on the north-east chimney breast.

THE BUILDING OF THE SCHOOL

We do not know how long the school took to build. It is not a very large building and it lacks the complexity of some of the grander private houses and castles in brick such as Tattershall or Kirkby Muxloe, for which we have detailed building accounts. There are no such accounts for Wainfleet School, but we do have a letter and indenture concerned with the carpentry work involved, date April 1484, so work may have commenced soon afterwards. The letter, sent to Bishop Waynflete by John Gyur, who was Warden of Tattershall College and no doubt a client of Waynflete, records initial discussions with suppliers of bricks and timber, Master Tontoft and John Robenson. It seems that a house on the school site had been pulled down and some of its materials were suitable for re-use, but new timber was required for floor and roof. Accordingly Henry Alsbroke of Tattershall was contracted to carry out the carpentry work. His specification is worth looking at in detail:

'.....a flore with a Rofe of Tymber of good herte of ooke conteyning in lenghte lxx foote, and in brede within tha walles xx^{ti} foote with dores windowes steyses hynches reredoses desks and all other thyngs necessarye that longeth to carpentry werk for a Chapell and Scolehouse to be made within the seid towne of Waynflete and the seid flore shal be well and sufficientlye made aftur the patron and facyon of the flore of the chambyr in the Towre on the gate of the maner of Essher in the Counte of Sotherey and the forseid Rofe to be of vii bayes evry baye frome the midds of the beme shall conteyn x foote in lengthe, and evry raffter shall be xx^{ti} foote in lengthe vi inches in brede and iii inches in thicknes. Also the lower doobyll purlyon pece shalbe viii inches of brede and vi inches in thicknes. And the overpurlyon for the seid flore shalbe of herte of ooke and of inch and quarter thickness dry and wrought for all which tymber stuff and borde necessarye to the same werke beyng of herte of ooke with the cariage of the same and for all man^r of workmanship nedefull to be doon by Carpenters in the foreseid werk



It is often said that the bricks were made at Ely and brought to Wainfleet by water, but there is no special reason for supposing this. It is much more likely that they were made in the vicinity of the building, thus saving transport costs. Stone was used for the windows at the east and west ends, and for the west door, but for the other windows cut and moulded bricks were used. These may originally have been rendered over with cement or plaster to give the appearance of stone. The bricks average 9½-10" (238-250mm) × 4½" (112mm) × 2¼-½" (56-62) and are laid in English bond.

The west end of the school building, showing the main door and upper window. Note the differing treatment of the two towers.

DESCRIPTION



West window, south wall, and east window of the school.

The design chosen for the school was slightly unusual. John Gygar suggested parts of Bishop Waynflete's palace at Esher could be used as a model and this may explain the appearance — part chapel and part gatehouse. The building is rectangular and orientated east-west and measures 76' (22.8m) × 26' (7.8m) externally and 70' (21 m) × 20' (6m) internally, excluding the two towers. The east end has a large Perpendicular window while the west end has a similar window over the main door, and is flanked by two octagonal towers divided into four stages by projecting drip-courses. The north and south sides have smaller windows, some of two lights, some of one, spaced irregularly. On the north side are two chimneys, the upper parts of which were enlarged and embellished in 19th century, while on the south is a single projection which now houses a cupboard. Judging by the vault beneath this it was originally used as a garderobe or privy, discharging into a cess-pit. This would accord well with the use of part of the ground floor as the master's lodging. The upper floor is a large uncluttered space with two large and elaborate 19th century fireplaces and wooden panelling round the walls. At the east end is the master's desk as this is the schoolroom. It is maintained by the Magdalen College authorities in its 19th century form which probably reflects its original layout. The splendid floor beams constructed by Henry Alsbroke survive, while a later timber roof rests on stone corbels carved as human heads. These may be recut work of the mid-19th century and probably contemporary with the fireplaces, but they have been claimed as original 15th century carving, along with the roof bosses.



Carved corbel heads supporting the roof (W.L. Rowson)

The ground floor is less well preserved but seems to have been divided up, to provide chambers for the master and perhaps the chapel. The top of a stone altar was moved in 1959 and is now in the garden on the south side. The school chapel served as the parish church while the present church was being constructed. The upper room was used as the chapel at that time, but the original layout is quite unknown.



(above left) Upper windows, south wall, (below left) Altar stone, now in the garden, (right) Garderobe projection on the south side.

Of the two towers the southern one contains three small rooms and in its top storey, reached from the roof, is a small bell of 15th century date inscribed AVE MARIA GRASIA PLENA ('Hail Mary, full of grace'). It hangs in a timber frame dated 1796. The northern tower carries a spiral staircase (with a cut-brick handrail to the first floor) which gives access to the schoolroom and then to the roof. Its top storey is much altered internally, being used as an observation post during the Second World War.



Upper room, from the west.

15th century bell in the south-west tower.

The roof is low-pitched and covered with lead, with low parapets, and carries several inscriptions relating to re-leading in 1856 and 1970.

Attached to the south side of the building are some 19th century outbuildings, while several more recent prefabricated huts stand in front of the west end.

THE SCHOOL

The new school was endowed with income from land totalling about 18 acres (7.28ha) and had gardens and an orchard. The master received a salary of 17 marks (£11.33) per annum from Magdalen College in the 18th century — presumably the sum was established in the 15th century, judging by the use of marks — and also had a small annual income from the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of Wainfleet All Saints. The President of Magdalen appointed the master, and the position was held as sinecure by Rectors of Wainfleet for many years; they in turn tended to appoint unqualified teachers and in the 18th century at least the school was at a very low ebb.

The state of the building gave cause for concern in 1585 and further repairs were carried out in 1608, 1755 and also evidently in 1856. It is clear that the relationships between accommodation, chapel, and schoolroom have varied considerably and some of the changes may reflect altered needs. In 1484 the school was designed to take seven boys, to educate them in (Latin and Greek) Grammar and ultimately to send them on to Magdalen College. The situation had changed radically by 1755 and henceforth it became an Elementary School for children of both sexes of whom there were on average 30-60. Numbers had dropped to three by 1877 and the then headmaster, Rev. William Gerrish, had the task of reconstructing a Grammar School and creating new standards. In 1933 the function of Wainfleet School was transferred to the new Skegness Grammar School, and it stood empty and unused until 1951, apart from its military use in 1939-45. From 1951-66 it served once more as a school, this time a Modern School, and in 1968 the ground floor was converted into a County Library, while the upper floor has remained unused ever since, apart from a short spell when it housed a Teachers' Centre.

The school is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, county no. 321, and it is also a Grade I listed building.

THE WAINFLEET TOKEN



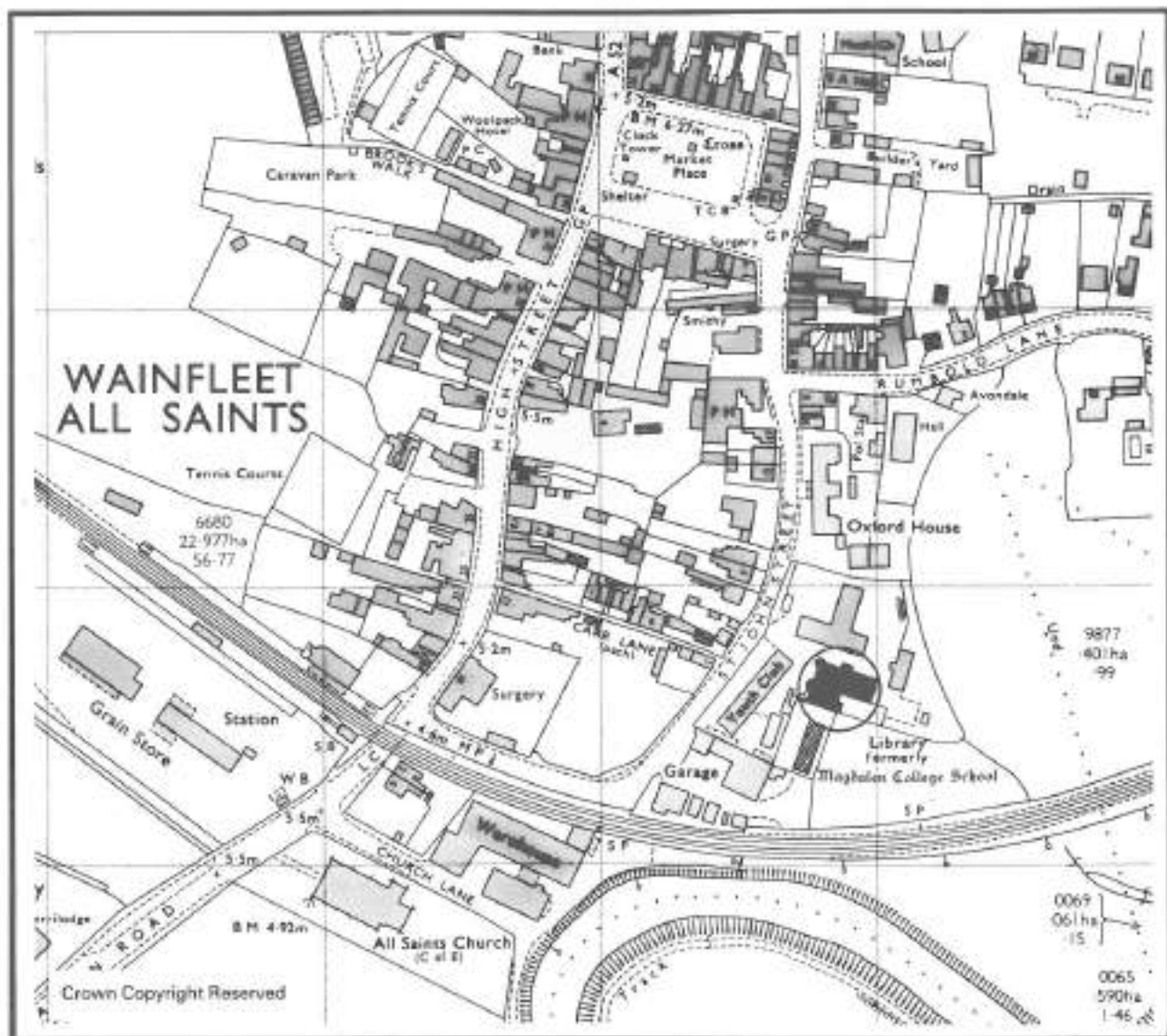
Obverse and reverse of the Wainfleet token. Twice actual size. (E. Tweedy)

In the last years of the 18th century there was a general shortage of copper coinage, occasioned by the fact that halfpence and farthings were not being minted regularly. This shortage was made up by the use of private tokens issued by traders, dealers, manufacturers etc. The tokens were circulated as small change and could be redeemed for silver when a sufficient number had been accumulated, from the issuer or at certain offices in named towns.

One such halfpenny token is the Wainfleet token. On the obverse it carries a view of the school and reads 'FOUNDED BY WILLIAM WAYNEFLETE 1459' (the date of foundation is an obvious error). The reverse has a figure of Hope standing, holding an anchor, with a ship in the background, and reads 'WAINFLEET HALFPENNY. 1793'. These tokens are fairly common. There are a number of varieties, in particular variations in the towns where it was redeemable, the names of which are stamped around the outer edge. The issuers of the Wainfleet token were D. Wright and S. Palmer.



Teacher and pupils, from a 16th century wood-cut.



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SOURCES

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