

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No.5

BARLINGS ABBEY



View of the ruins from the east, c. 1730, from a drawing by W. Millecent

THE SETTING

Barlings Abbey lies 7 miles east of Lincoln, close to the Langworth or Barlings Eau, a tributary of the River Witham. The Witham Valley contains one of the greatest concentrations of religious houses in Lincolnshire and indeed in the British Isles, with six monasteries sharing a 10-mile stretch of the north bank. The Abbey is approached by narrow lanes from Langworth (2½ miles) and Reepham (3 miles), and the last mile is a single-track road serving the scattered farms and houses that make up the hamlet of Low Barlings. This creates a feeling of isolation today but there can be little doubt that when the Abbey was functioning there would have been a continual traffic of carts and wagons bringing goods to and from the Abbey and its scattered estates, as well as the stream of travellers seeking shelter and food and officials visiting the Abbot on matters of Church and State.

The Abbey lies on a low eminence at the edge of the Witham fen, sufficiently high to keep clear of the winter flooding but as close to the river as possible, in order to make use

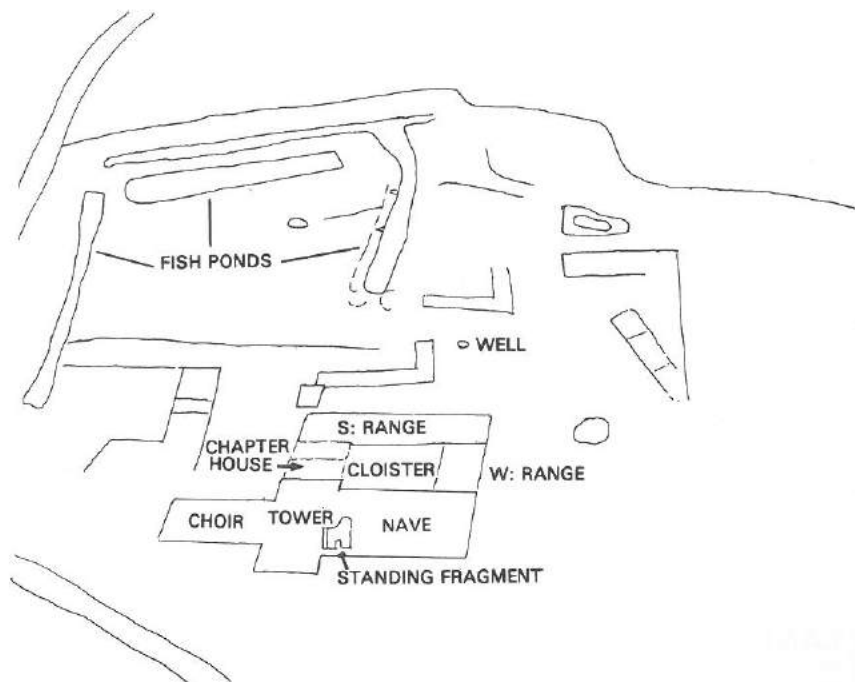
to them to provide support for a further four. By 1377 there were no less than thirty-seven canons, but this must have marked a high point for in 1412 there were only twenty-seven and by the end of the century twenty was about the average.

As canons the brethren could act as vicars in the churches which they controlled and the churches of Scothern and Stainton-by-Langworth were regularly served in this way. Others were no doubt involved with the Chantry Chapel which had been established at Langworth under the will of William of Ingleby in 1267 and the Langworth leper hospital which they took into their control in 1313.



Aerial photograph of the Abbey site from the north

(Copyright: John East)



Sketch plan to interpret the earthworks shown on the aerial photograph above

The Abbot would regularly travel to visit other monasteries and attend conferences at home and abroad, while the Cellarer, whose job it was to supervise the property of the Abbey, must have spent much of his time visiting the scattered estates.

An interesting account survives in the State Papers of some expenses incurred by the Abbot in 1535. Three rings set with precious stones were bought for £8; a horse for £3; 'Kirtle cloth for his sister' cost 8s; while 'a tun of claret' for £4 13s 4d, sugar at 6d per pound, and spices of various kinds indicate the form his hospitality took.

We know the names of a number of the canons from records of official visits by a senior Abbot of the Order; each canon is listed in these and is reprimanded for his faults, if any. When the canons took their vows it seems very likely that they changed their surname to that of their place of birth; in a few cases canons seem to be called by both names indifferently. Most of the names seem to indicate a local origin though in 1536 those canons implicated in the Lincolnshire Rising have names which seem to indicate an origin in West Yorkshire or Cumbria. They may have been transferred from one of the small monasteries in that area surrendered a year or so previously.

THE BUILDINGS

All that survives of the Abbey is one fragment of masonry which formed a solid wall west of the tower of the church. Otherwise the line of the walls of church and outer buildings can be seen only from the soil-covered mounds of rubble and trenches cut in the past to remove the stone. Such lines can best be seen from the air.

The church was about 300 feet long and the East window was 40 feet high; the magnificent tower, which survived into the 18th century, was 180 feet high and 40 feet square, surmounted by four pinnacles, and must have provided a landmark for considerable distances. The surviving fragment represents the most westerly bay of the canons' choir which projected through the tower arch into the nave, where the servants of the monastery would have heard the mass, separated entirely from the canons by a screen. All the architectural details are of the 14th century and probably belong to the major rebuilding during the reign of Edward III.

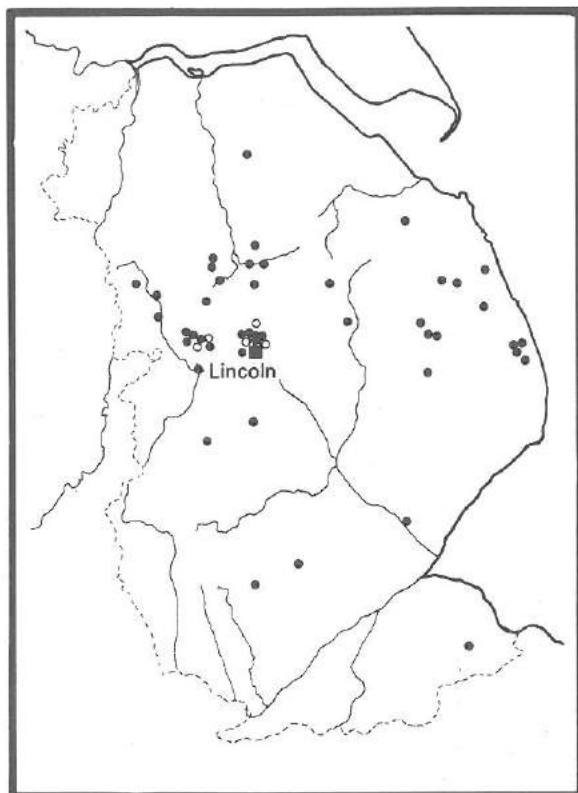
To the south of the church lay the **cloister**, an open quadrangle, surrounded by four ranges of buildings: to the east the **chapter house** and **dormitory**, to the south the **refectory** and **kitchen** and to the west a long building serving as **cellarage** and perhaps a **guest house**. The church of course formed the northern side. To the south of the cloister buildings are earthworks of at least two other groups of buildings which may represent the **abbot's house** and/or **guest house**. A further group of buildings can be seen to the south-east of the church; this may be the **infirmary**.

The whole of the south-east corner is taken up with a complex system of interconnecting **fishponds** and in the centre of the precinct is the **Abbey well**, surrounded by a fence and with a tree growing out of one edge.

Entrance to the precinct was no doubt gained from the north side, at or near the point where the present entrance is. A will of 1400 mentions a **chapel** to St. Eligius, which probably stood at the gate and served travellers and of course women who could not enter the precinct.

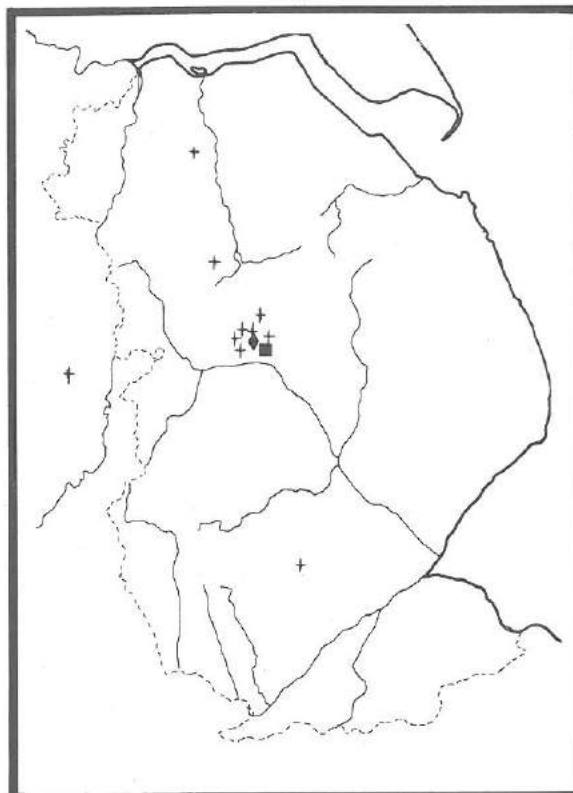
THE ABBEY LANDS

Like most religious houses Barlings possessed extensive and scattered land-holdings, ranging from single strips in the common fields to whole manors. Sheep-farming was obviously a very important element in its wealth: twenty-five sacks of wool (about 3,000 fleeces) were exported annually from its land, placing it high on the list of exporters. Map



Barlings Abbey ■ Abbey Site
● Land Holding
○ Grange

Map 1 showing the geographical spread of Barlings Abbey land-holdings



Barlings Abbey ■ Abbey Site
+ Church
◆ Hospital

Map 2 showing the locations of churches and hospital controlled by Barlings Abbey

1 shows the geographical spread of land-holdings which were concentrated heavily in central and east Lincolnshire. Five **granges** are recorded:

- Holme (= Holme in Sudbrooke)
- Shepehouse (= Barlings Grange?)
- Rysom (= Riseholme Grange)
- Lyng (= Grange de Lyngs)
- Ryersby (= Reasby Grange in Stainton-by-Langworth)

These were concentrated land-holdings controlled from a building which might vary in size and importance from a small farmhouse to a monastery-in-miniature with a chapel. The granges belonging to Barlings were probably of a relatively small size and were leased out to lay tenants quite early on. Churches too, were seen as a source of revenue. Map 2 shows the spread of those in which Barlings Abbey had an interest, extracting various tithes and payments, supplying canons as vicars, or nominating secular clergy.

THE LINCOLNSHIRE RISING

In October 1536 armed rebellion broke out in Louth and Horncastle, originating among the poorer people and tradesmen who saw their religion and way of life threatened, as well as feeling oppressed by excessive taxation. The Dissolution of the smaller monasteries (those worth under £200 per annum) was already under way and it was beginning to be plain that the larger ones might soon follow suit. Despite this few of the monks and canons expressed any desire to join the rising; it is quite clear that in the main they were forced to join by the other rebels who needed their presence to attract support.

The rebels reached Barlings on the way to Lincoln on 7th October; a number billeted themselves on the monastery and threats were used to extract supplies and food. Later the Abbot was 'commanded . . . to meet the host at Langwathe Lane End with his

brethren and harness and victuals' as he afterwards claimed. Six of his canons were forced to join the rebels and when the Rising collapsed four of the canons, together with the Abbot, Matthew Mackarell, paid for their alleged treason with their lives. None of the other canons received a pension, as a result of this involvement.

THE AFTERMATH

The Dissolution of the Abbey followed swiftly on the execution of the rebels. Much of the plate and valuables had been distributed among the faithful servants of the Abbey when trouble seemed imminent and Thomas Cromwell had to issue threats to hang anyone found in possession of Abbey property. A number of canons had provided for their future in this way and it is not clear that all the property was ever recovered.

In 1537 the lead was being stripped from the roofs and was estimated to be worth £400. More than a horse-load of the Abbot's books were also removed. No doubt other belongings were sold off to local buyers or burnt on the spot.

The site of the Abbey and its estates went to Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, brother-in-law of the King, but subsequently much of the land was split up and sold off to smaller landowners.

With the loss of its roof the Abbey would have rapidly fallen into ruin: the tower and parts of the east range of the cloister survived into the early 18th century. The tower fell in 1757.

In 1791 John Byng wrote in his travel-journal 'what remains . . . must soon come to the ground; for they are daily carting away the stones and much has fallen, or been pull'd down, within these 3 years.' Destruction continued into the 19th century; one tenant, fearing for the safety of his cattle, attempted to pull down the last fragment of stonework with a team of horses, but luckily failed in his attempt!

The Abbey stonework was carted away to build many local farm houses and the rubble used for hard-core. Ferry House, which stands at the gate to the Abbey, is constructed of ashlar and has a niche on the front containing reset vaulting ribs. A little further away along the lane stands the ruin of a Tudor stone house. In the core of its wall are fragments of mediaeval floor tile and the whole building is no doubt constructed from Abbey materials.

SOURCES

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Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII (Public Record Office)

City and County Museum Records

Lincolnshire Archives Office

Andrew White January 1979
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