

Abbeys of the Witham Valley

by Andrew White

Lincolnshire County Council
Lincolnshire Museums ©1978

INTRODUCTION

In the Middle Ages Lincolnshire was one of the areas of Britain most heavily populated with monastic houses, and within the county the greatest concentration was to be found in the middle stretches of the Witham Valley between Lincoln and Tattershall.

Here were the two great Abbeys of Bardney and Kirkstead and five smaller monasteries of varying degrees of wealth, at Barlings, Stainfield, Topholme, Stixwold and Nocton.

Of all this activity and wealth little indication survives. In 1536 anger at the Dissolution of the monasteries and fear for the future of their religious way of life sparked off rebellion among the men of Louth and Horncastle and they marched on Lincoln to demand satisfaction. This 'Lincolnshire Rising' collapsed, but several of the monasteries were implicated and greater pains were taken here than elsewhere after the Dissolution to make sure that never more would such places become a focus for unrest.

Nevertheless interesting remains still exist. This guide describes all the sites and suggests the most satisfactory routes between them for drivers and cyclists. Although the whole circuit is rather too long for walkers, many of these Abbeys are close to the line of Lincolnshire County Council's 'Viking Way' footpath and can be seen by making short detours from it. Note that all the sites are on private property and that inconsiderate behaviour might close them to future visitors. In particular please remember to shut all gates behind you and to park carefully to avoid holding up agricultural vehicles on narrow roads.

FURTHER READING

D. M. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock — *Mediaeval Religious Houses of England* (1954).

Victoria County History — *Lincolnshire Vol II* (1906).

F. H. Crossley — *The English Abbey* (1935).

R. Gilyard-Beer — *Abbeys. An Introduction to the Religious Houses of England and Wales* (1959).

D. M. Knowles and J. K. S. St. Joseph — *Monastic sites from the air*. (1952).

Ordnance Survey — *Map of Monastic Britain* (South sheet) (1954).

D. M. Owen — *Church and Society in Mediaeval Lincolnshire* (1971).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to acknowledge the help of the various landowners in providing information on access.

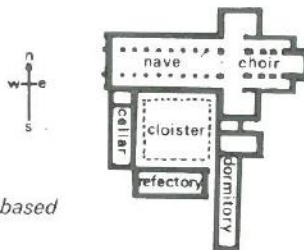
Front Cover — Seal-matrix of Bardney Abbey found during excavations in 1909-14. Original in British Museum. (G. K. Benton).

THE ORDERS

Each monastery belonged to an **Order**. The Orders such as the **Cistercians** and **Benedictines** followed different versions of the rule of life proposed by St Benedict. The Cistercians believed in isolation, poverty, and the value of manual work. They also operated a system in which each house owed obedience to the house from which it had been colonized, and eventually to the mother house at Citeaux in France. They were copied to a certain extent by the **Premonstratensians** who followed the rule of St. Augustine, as did the **Augustinians**. Variations between the Orders extended to the colour and cut of habits, the richness or simplicity of furnishings, and the nature of religious observance.

MONASTIC LIFE

Most monasteries followed a fairly standardized layout designed for compactness and isolation from the outside world. The principal building was the **church**, usually cruciform, with the long eastern arm forming the **choir** and housing the **high altar** and various lesser altars at which a continuous round of masses could be said. South of the church lay the **cloister**, an open square surrounded by the living quarters. In the open-sided corridors flanking the cloister the monks carried out much of their study and writing. The eastern range contained the **sacristy** and **treasury** where the mass vessels, books and valuables of the monastery were kept, the **chapter house** where the monks gathered once a week for discussion and discipline, and a **warming-house**, which contained one of the few fireplaces in the monastery. Over the top was the monks' **dormitory**. The southern range contained cellars over the top of which lay the **refectory** where the monks ate, while the western range housed either the lay brethren, or the head of the house and any guests, depending on the order. Outside this main group of buildings lay the **kitchens**, the **reredorter** (communal lavatories), the barns, windmills and fishponds, and everything that was necessary for day-to-day living. Frequently the whole area or **precinct** was surrounded by a ditch or moat and entered via a **gatehouse**.



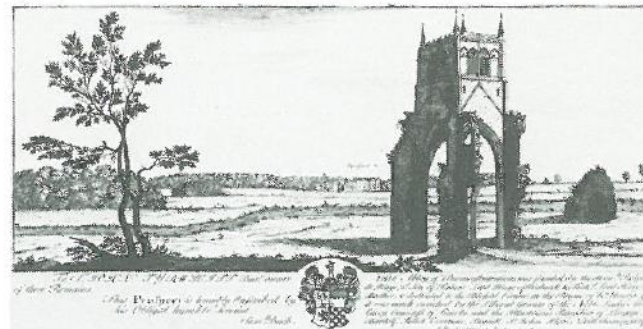
Simplified plan of monastery, based on that of Bardney Abbey

The head of a major monastery was the **Abbot** (or **Abbess** in the case of nuns) with a **Prior** (or **Prioress**) as a deputy. In smaller or dependent monasteries only the latter existed. Among the other monks who had specialized jobs to do were the **Sacrist**, who looked after the church, vestments, and mass vessels; the **Cellarer**, who was in charge of the Abbey estates; the **Precentor** who acted as choir-master, and the **Infirmarian** and **Almoner** who attended to the sick and the poor respectively.

Beside the daily round of nine services each monk took his share of writing, study and meditation. Manual work was highly regarded by some Orders; the Cistercians relied heavily on **Lay Brethren** for much of the heavy agricultural work.

BARLINGS ABBEY

Barlings was founded by Ralf de Haya in 1154 and the first monks came from Newsham Abbey near Grimsby, itself the first Premonstratensian monastery in England. At first it stood where Barlings Grange and church now stand but after a few years a new site about a mile to the south was chosen, at a place called Oxeney. No doubt the motive was the better transport facilities offered by the Barlings Eau, a tributary of the Witham, which would give direct contact by water with Lincoln and the sea.



Barlings Abbey, from an engraving by S. Buck, 1726

In 1536 the monastery was implicated in the Lincolnshire Rising; it lay on the line of the rebels' advance on Lincoln and several of the canons were persuaded to lend assistance and even join the mob. For this the Abbot and four canons were later executed and none of the other canons received a pension after the Dissolution.

All that remains above ground of the Abbey is a tall fragment of the wall of the nave, just west of the tower, but there are very extensive earthworks to the south, filling the whole of the precinct. The fine central tower fell in 1757 and in 1791 John Byng said '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'. In the south east corner of the precinct are a series of long channels flanked by high banks, forming fish-ponds. In the centre of the precinct, under a solitary tree, is the Abbey well.

STAINFIELD PRIORY

Stainfield Priory, a house of Benedictine Nuns, was founded in about 1154 by William or Henry de Percy. In 1377 there was a prioress and twenty nuns here, probably the maximum number, and although never a rich house, Stainfield seems to have had considerable interests in the wool-trade, at one stage being one of the principal exporters among the Lincolnshire monasteries. In 1536 the nunnery was dissolved, several of the nuns being transferred to the refounded Stixwold Priory, which survived until 1539. A few of the ex-nuns were still receiving pensions thirty years later.

After the Dissolution the Tyrwhitt family built a house at Stainfield, probably of stone from the Priory and possibly on its site, but a small building which appears in the background of Samuel Buck's engraving of Barlings Abbey may be one of the last fragments.

BARDNEY ABBEY

Bardney, alone of all the Witham Abbeys, was an Anglo-Saxon foundation, dating from the end of the seventh century, Ethelred the King of Mercia being one of its patrons. It did not survive the Viking settlement-period of the ninth century and even its site is uncertain. It may lie below the later Abbey, but Leland, writing in about 1535, says 'The monks hold opinion that the old Abbey of Bardney was not in the very same place wher the new ys, but at a graunge or dayre of theyrs a myle of'.

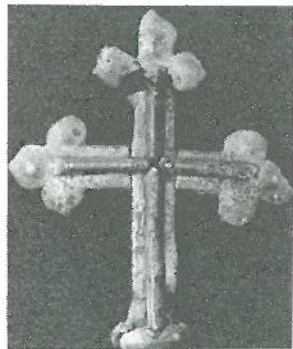
Refounded in 1087 and again in 1115, Bardney rapidly became one of the most important of the Lincolnshire monasteries. There were no more than twenty monks there at the most but the



Infra-red aerial photograph of Bardney Abbey (G. K. Benton)

Abbey held considerable property. The Parish Church until 1434 lay within the precinct; by that date it had become so decrepit that an entirely new church was constructed in the village, the chancel being built of bricks from the kilns set up for the building of Tattershall Castle. A fine series of documents survives from the 15th century and records that Bardney was by no means a happy or harmonious house at that time.

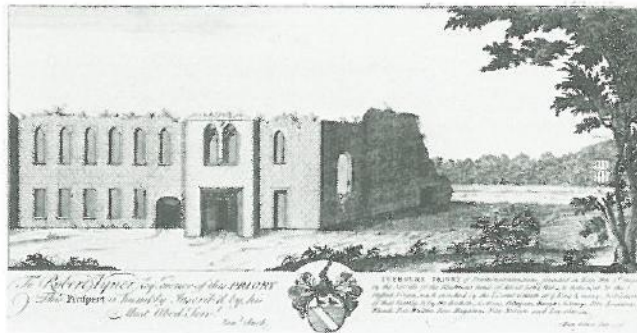
The site of the Abbey was excavated in 1909-14 by the Vicar of Bardney, Canon Laing, and virtually the whole plan was revealed. Many of the buildings were in a relatively good state of preservation, particularly the monastic church whose floor was a mass of mediaeval grave-slabs, although nothing save earthworks was to be seen prior to the excavation and nearly all standing masonry had disappeared as early as the 18th century. Today the site is in the guardianship of the Department of the Environment and once more under grass, though the outlines of buildings can quite clearly be seen under the turf. To the north of the Abbey are traces of a large barn and the circular foundations of a windmill or a dovecot. Finds from the excavations can be seen at the City and County Museum, Lincoln, at the small Display Centre in Bardney village, and in Bardney parish church.



Gilt-brass cross found during excavations at Bardney Abbey (G. K. Benton)

TUPHOLME ABBEY

Tupholme Abbey, like Barlings a house of the Premonstratensian order, was founded between 1155 and 1166 by Gilbert de Neville and colonized by monks from Newsham Abbey near Grimsby. It lies about 2 miles from Bardney and nearly 1½ miles from the river Witham, to which it may have been connected by a canal for shipping, according to a charter of the 13th century.



Tupholme Abbey, from an engraving by S. Buck, 1726

The greatest number of canons here was sixteen in 1482; at the Dissolution in 1536 the Abbot and eight canons received pensions. John Leland, writing shortly after this, records that 'Sir Christopher Willoughby's sun and heyre dwellith now at Tupholme Priory...', which suggests that some of the buildings of the Abbey were for a short time at least converted into a house.

The site of the Abbey is now scheduled as an Ancient Monument and is mostly under pasture. Of a gatehouse near the present entrance, drawn by William Stukeley before 1725, there is no trace, but the south wall of the Refectory in Early English style with the Reader's Pulpit in position still survives intact, attached to a group of derelict farm buildings.

STIXWOULD PRIORY

Founded in about 1135 by Lucy, Countess of Chester, Stixwold Priory had a chequered career. It was a house of Cistercian nuns, with a complement of thirty at maximum and there were also probably several chaplains attached to it to say the masses.

Dissolved in 1536 it was soon after refounded for the nuns of Stainfield, and was refounded once more in 1537 under the Premonstratensian order. It was not finally dissolved until 1539, when the prioress and fourteen nuns received pensions. The site of the Priory passed to Sir Robert Tyrwhitt, a great buyer of monastic land locally.

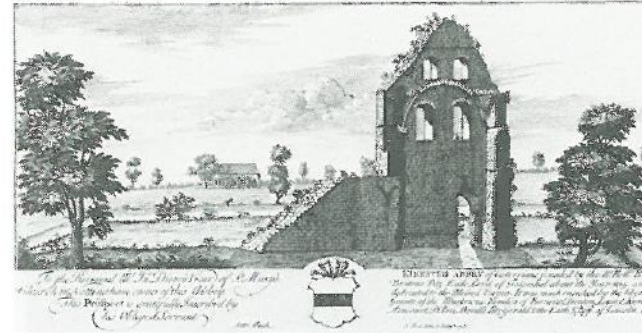


Stixwold Priory Gatehouse c. 1845

Very little of the Priory survives, save a few slight earthworks to the west of Abbey Farm. A gatehouse survived until 1849 but much of the Priory stone was removed in 1845 to build a new church at Woodhall Spa. Some fragments of carved stone and coffin lids are preserved in Stixwold church and two carved roof-bosses can be seen in the City and County Museum, Lincoln.

KIRKSTEAD ABBEY

Such was the prestige of the Cistercian order in 1139 that Kirkstead Abbey was one of three monasteries colonized simultaneously from Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire. Its original site is unknown, for in 1187 it was moved to the present position about half a mile from the Witham. Although never one of the richest houses in the county it was extremely influential.



Kirkstead Abbey, from an engraving by S. Buck, 1726

The extensive precinct never housed more than twenty-nine monks, but was originally intended for the very large numbers of lay brethren who did most of the manual work. In 1537 the Abbot and three monks were executed for their part in the Lincolnshire Rising and in the same year the Abbey was dissolved, being granted first to Charles, Duke of Suffolk, and later passing to the Fiennes family, one of whom was described as 'of Christed Abbey' in 1643 — very probably their house was built from the Abbey ruins.

As at Barlings, the Abbey is now represented by a single tall crag of masonry, here forming the south east angle of the south transept, but there are very substantial earthworks from which the positions of church and cloister can be made out without much difficulty, and in a field to the north of the Abbey are a magnificent series of mediaeval fishponds. A very early plan of the site made in 1716 by William Stukeley records the position of several buildings which have now gone, and also elements of the later house. To the south of the Abbey lies the beautiful chapel of St. Leonard, built c. 1230-40 to serve the dependants of the monastery and guests.

NOCTON PARK PRIORY

Nocton Park was a small and very poor house, founded in the reign of Stephen by Robert Darcy for canons of the Augustinian order, who never numbered more than nine. At the Dissolution in 1536 there was only the Prior and four other canons. In such circumstances the full communal monastic life must have been difficult to achieve. An interesting record of a visitation by Bishop Alnwick in 1440 survives: from it we find that a canon of Thornton Abbey had been sent to Nocton for disciplinary reasons, plainly an unsuccessful move since he was now accused of a relationship with a woman of nearby Bardney. After the Dissolution the former Prior of Nocton became vicar of Metheringham, and lived on until 1559. The Priory site passed in the time of Elizabeth I to Henry Stanley, Lord Strange, who built a house from the ruins. A drawing by William Stukeley in 1727 shows the earthworks as they appeared then.

GUIDED TOUR

This tour covers some 45 miles and would form the basis of a day's outing by car or cycle. Although for the sake of convenience it starts in Lincoln, it can be joined at any point and of course may be shortened by leaving out certain of the monasteries or by returning from some intermediate point. Alternative turning points are indicated below.

Leave Lincoln by the Wragby Road (A.158). After 5 miles turn right off the main road in Langworth village and follow the minor road for 1 mile when you will see Barlings Grange and the church on your left. Bear left and follow a narrow lane for about a mile to Low Barlings where you will see the Abbey ruins behind a cottage built of Abbey stone. Park at the roadside before you reach the wide track leading to this cottage, taking great care not to block the roadway which is used by heavy vehicles. At the corner of the track is Ulster Cottage, a tall brick house, to which is attached the remains of a Tudor stone house. (An alternative and quieter route may be taken by cars or cycles by bearing right just inside the Lincoln boundary along Hawthorn Road. After passing the level crossing in Reepham bear left and after 2½ miles you will reach Barlings Grange, from which follow the route above.)

Access to Barlings Abbey is through a gate near the cottage. This gate is sometimes locked when there is stock in the field, in which case climb over the left-hand end. On your left is the tall fragment of wall, running east/west. Walking towards this you

Returning to the centre of Bardney take the Horncastle Road (B.1190). (An alternative route to shorten the tour from this point is to take the Lincoln road (B.1190) via Bardney bridge and Potterhanworth and bear right to Branston and so back to Lincoln.)

In two miles, past a sharp bend in the road, you will see the ruins of Topholme Abbey on your right. Park on the pull-in at the bend and follow the track across the field towards the standing length of wall. This is the south wall of the Refectory, at first floor level, and the lower tier of arches represents the vaulted cellars. Facing this you are inside the building with the site of the cloister and church behind you. Passing through a doorway in this wall you will enter a derelict farm-yard with buildings abutting on the outer face of the Refectory wall. Behind the left-hand range of buildings is a small moated site covered with trees, perhaps representing the Abbot's Lodging.

From Topholme continue along the same road through Bucknall, then take the next lane on the right, which meanders across a drain and back again. Stixwold Priory is a confused set of earthworks on private land (no access) behind Abbey Farm, the large farm on your right. Stixwold church, just round the corner in the village, contains a few relics of the Priory. Take the next right and follow the road to Woodhall Spa. (In the church here, reached by turning left at the main crossroads, are a few items from Kirkstead Abbey, and an illustrated guide to the Abbey and Chapel of St. Leonard can be bought). If you turn right at the main crossroads Kirkstead Abbey can be reached by taking a

will be walking up the nave of the church and on your right you will see a series of earthworks marking the position of the cloister. Further away to your right are the Abbey fishponds which appear as deep rectangular hollows interconnected by narrow ditches.

Returning from Barlings Abbey towards the main A.158 in Langworth village you will be following in the footsteps of the canons of Barlings who carried armour and provisions to the rebels at 'Langwase lane end' that October day in 1536. Turn right off the main road after less than half a mile and follow the lane all the way to Stainfield. The site of the Priory is now occupied by the Hall, a 19th century successor of the Tudor house of the Tyrwhitts, and lies in a private park to your left. (There is a public road to Kingthorpe through the park from which church and house can be seen, as well as earthworks of the former village). Continue along the same road to join the B.1202 and turn right for Bardney. Before you reach the centre of Bardney follow a sign to the right, reaching the Abbey after about half a mile. It is best to park opposite the farm-buildings, taking care to avoid blocking entrances. Access to the Abbey is through the gate on the track and the next gate on your right. Approaching the site from this point towards the very prominent mounds of spoil from the excavation you enter the precinct at the south-west corner. The buildings on your left form the western range, and following these you enter the Abbey church, easily recognised by the turf covered pillar bases. Walking up the church the cloister etc., will lie to your right.

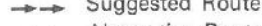
narrow lane to the left, after a little under a mile. Park where the lane bears sharply left. The key to the chapel can be obtained from Abbey Farm, a little further along the lane, in the garden of which is much carved stone from the Abbey. Cross the field towards the standing fragment of masonry which formed the south east corner of the south transept. The track crosses the site of the church at right angles and bisects the cloister. Other major buildings (Refectory and Lay Brothers' range) flank the track just beyond the standing fragment, while further earthworks including fishponds and buildings probably related to the Post-Dissolution house lie to your right. By continuing along the track and through two gates you come to St. Leonard's Chapel.

Returning to the main gate follow the lane you came on and turn left at the T-junction, crossing Kirkstead Bridge. Turn right in Martin village (4 miles) and follow the B.1188 to Metheringham, turning right again just beyond Metheringham village on to the B.1189 which can be followed all the way to Lincoln, via Branston and Canwick. Nocton Priory, the only monastery on this side of the Witham valley north of Martin, lies to the east of Nocton village at Abbey Hill, but there is no public access to the site. Besides actual monasteries there were a number of important monastic farms (granges) on this side of the valley, including Kirkstead's property at Linwood Grange in Blankney and Sheepwash Grange in Canwick as well as the nearby quay and warehouses claimed by Kirkstead in the 13th century at Calscroft, the exact site of which is still unknown. The tour ends on the south-east side of Lincoln.

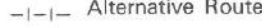
KEY



Monastic Site



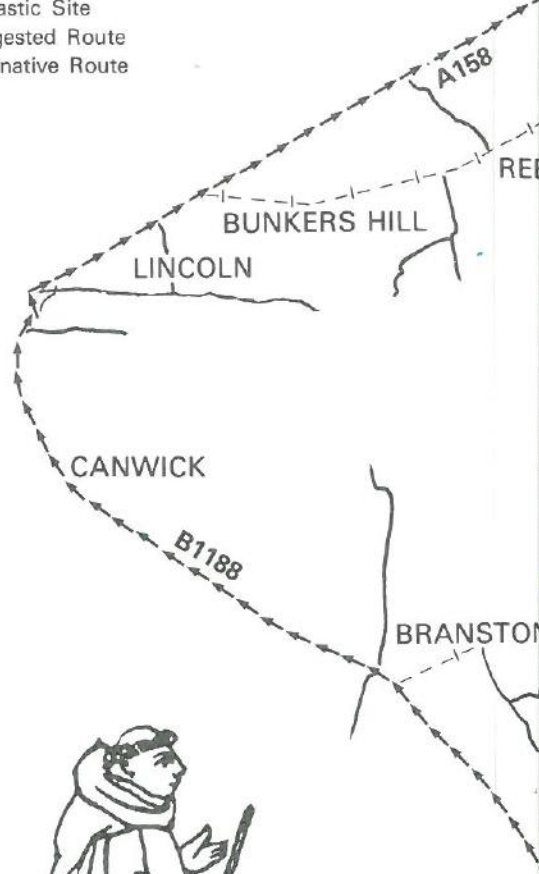
Suggested Route



Alternative Route



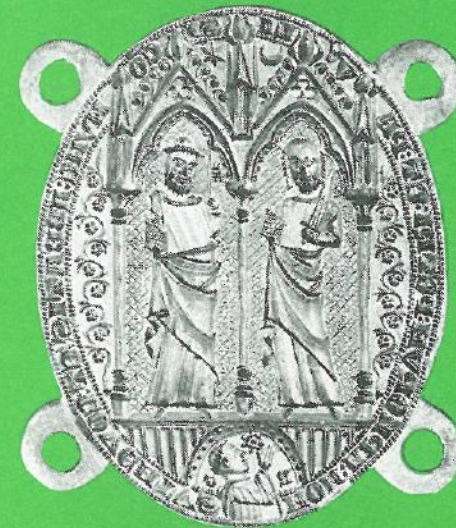
friar





ABBEYS OF THE WITHAM VALLEY

between Lincoln and Tattershall



A GUIDE

Lincolnshire Museums
City & County Museum
Lincoln
1978