



A short history of St Benet's Abbey

The Abbey of St Benet at Holme lies deep in the Broadland of East Norfolk, close to the meeting place of the rivers Bure and Ant. This was the only Norfolk monastery founded in the Anglo-Saxon period which continued in use throughout the Middle Ages – the only comparable ones in East Anglia were the royal abbeys at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk and Ely in Cambridgeshire. However, St Benet's, unlike Bury and Ely, was largely abandoned after the closure of the monastery in the 1530s, because of its inaccessible location.

Most of the medieval buildings have been demolished except for the gatehouse which has a later windmill built onto it. The surviving ruins of the church and the precinct walls can also be seen, as well as extensive earthwork remains.

We do not know exactly when the first Benedictine monastery was founded here, but it is thought to have been in 1019. King Cnut (who reigned 1016–1035) was an important benefactor, and this land may have been a royal estate.

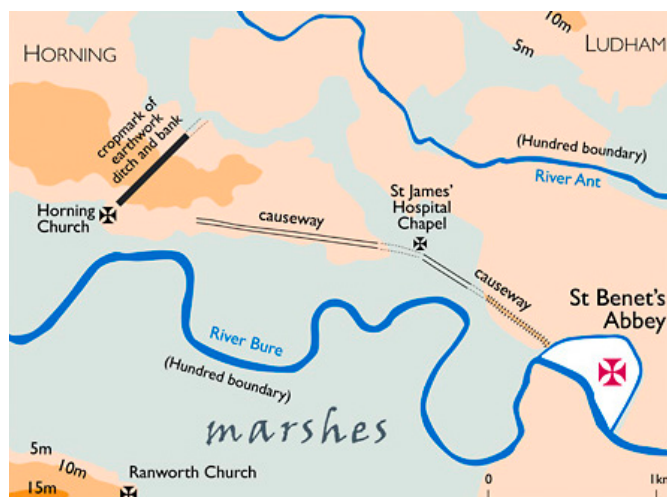
The place might have been a religious site long before then. According to a medieval chronicle an earlier hermit named Suneman living in a chapel on 'Cowholm'. This chapel was destroyed by the Vikings - perhaps in the 860s, when a Danish

army caused havoc in East Anglia – but by the late 10th century a monk called Wulfic was said to have settled there with seven followers.

We have no reliable evidence to support this but a remote 'island' site such as St Benet's was a likely site for an Anglo-Saxon hermit. Many other early monasteries in East Anglia were sited in similar places. When the 11th-century monastery was founded, however, St Benet's may not have been a truly isolated place. River traffic would have passed by. A massive bank and ditch (now levelled by agriculture) 2km to the west of the site, near Horning church, may have been built to mark the limit of a great estate – maybe even a royal property – bounded elsewhere by the rivers Bure and Ant.

The medieval abbey

Domesday Book (compiled in 1086) tells us that St Benet's Abbey was well endowed by the time of the Norman Conquest, and held much land nearby. At this time it was Norfolk's leading monastery. One of its patrons was Ralph Guader, Earl of East Anglia. Guader led a failed revolt against William I in 1075 and the Abbey could have been 'tainted' politically by this. Guader's replacement, the loyal Roger Bigod, chose to support new foundations at Thetford, Castle Acre and elsewhere. Despite this, by the end of the 13th century St Benet's was still a wealthy establishment, with property in 76 parishes but it lacked the relics of an important saint and so could not compete with the major pilgrimage destinations such as Walsingham or Bury St Edmunds. In the 12th and 13th centuries the abbey tried to promote the cult of St Margaret of Holm, supposedly killed at Hoveton in 1170, but this never prospered.



Location of St Benet's Abbey, showing Horning Church, the earthwork bank, the causeway across the marshes and other features



Reconstruction of St Benet's Abbey c. AD 1500 (Susan White)

The first stone church was probably built in Cnut's time by Abbot Aelfsige, replacing one 'of mud' (i.e. of wattle and daub). Many documents record the development of the building. The cloister, chapter house and dormitory are all mentioned in the 12th century, and a fine new choir and east end of the church

was completed in 1274. The whole complex was surrounded to the south by the River Bure, and elsewhere by a ditch and an enclosure wall, the base of which can still be seen. The main surviving building, the west great gatehouse, dates to the 14th century. Visitors would have reached this grand entrance along a causeway over the marshes from Horning. This earthwork is still clearly visible today.

The number of monks varied – at a visitation in 1514 there were 23. The Order of St Benedict divided a monk's time between work, prayer and spiritual study, but 'lay brothers' and servants would have done many manual duties on their behalf. The monastic estates would have produced much of the food needed by the community. Visitors can see the well preserved medieval fish ponds, some of the best surviving examples in the country.

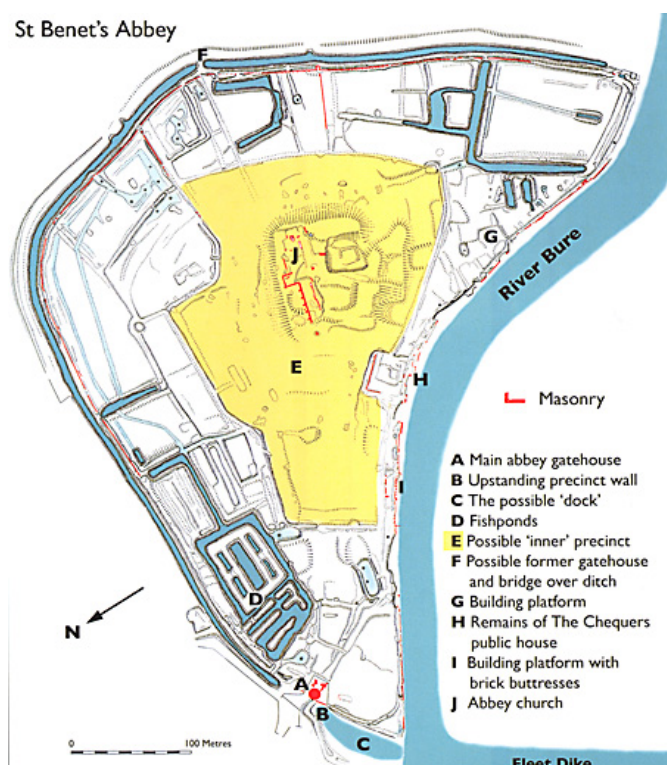
The Dissolution and afterwards

Two Acts of Suppression passed by Henry VIII's government in 1536 and 1539 led to the closure of all English monasteries and the seizure of their property by the Crown – except for St Benet's.

Less than a month after the death of Bishop Nyx of Norwich, early in 1536, the king secured an Act of Parliament allowing him to seize endowments of the bishopric. He seems already to have earmarked the abbot of St Benet's, William Rugge, to succeed Nyx. Rugge was consecrated bishop in June 1536 but continued as abbot and it was intended that he would finance the Norwich bishopric out of the St Benet's estates.

St Benet's was already hugely in debt and in no position to maintain the bishopric. Rugge was supposed to retain a dozen monks at the abbey, but by 1545 the site was abandoned, and Rugge himself was forced into retirement five years later. Demolition of buildings followed, and was complete by 1579. By 1585

St Benet's Abbey



Plan of St Benet's Abbey, showing earthwork features and masonry remains

a single fisherman lived at the 'utterly ruined' site.

Remarkably, to this day the Bishop of Norwich remains technically the Abbot of St Benet's, even though there have been no monks here for over 450 years. He leads an annual open air service at the site on the first Sunday of August.

After the abbey closed down the Ludham Hall estate, which included St Benet's Abbey, was leased to a succession of local farmers.

A 1702 map of the site shows a cottage (later the Chequers Inn), barn and stable – probably survivals of the abbey buildings - as well as the gatehouse. There is no sign yet of the mill which was constructed on top of the gatehouse though there is a small timber drainage mill in the far eastern corner of the precinct.

In the early 1720s three drawings of the 2-storey gatehouse, each from a different perspective, were produced and later published by the Society of Antiquaries. Shortly after this, the upper storey was removed to allow a brick tower windmill to be built into the remains, making the most of the firm foundations in the marshy terrain.

The mill

A map of 1731 includes an illustration of the mill and shows it had a two-storey building attached and a wet 'dock' nearby which would have allowed trading vessels to load and unload easily.

It was almost certainly built to process colza or rape seed which at that time was used for lighting and lubrication. References to an 'Oylman of St Benet's' appear in the Ludham parish registers from late 1725 and throughout the 1730s.

The oil production process was complex, hot and smelly. The oil-bearing seeds were crushed by stones and the resulting pulp was heated in pans before being bagged up and placed in 'stamps' to press it and extract the oil. The residue was crushed and pressed again to produce oil cake, sold as cattle feed. The stamps made oil mills deafeningly noisy and they were known as unpleasant places to work.

As a former oil mill, the mill is of considerable rarity and interest. The likely build date of 1725 also makes it Norfolk's second oldest windmill. But from 1740 onwards any references to the mill are only to it as a drainage mill. Perhaps it was constructed with a dual purpose in mind, or perhaps it was adapted to take over the drainage function of the earlier mill on site.

In the early 1800s, the strange sight of a working windmill within the medieval monastic ruins attracted a number of artists col-



The Abbey gatehouse from the west, showing the mill built upon it in the 18th century

lectively known as the 'Norwich School'. Their pictures provide us with evidence of its early nineteenth century appearance. In the 1850s at least three different photographers also captured images of the mill when it was still working to drain the marsh.

The Chequers Inn

The 'oylmen' and later, 'marshmen', who operated the mill lived in the cottage on the site which for much of the nineteenth century also functioned as The Chequers, a wherryman's inn.

The mill was reputedly damaged in a gale in 1863 which ended its working days and the last marshman to run both The Chequers and operate the mill, William Grapes, left the site in 1867.

By the 1870s the former Chequers had been divided into 2 cottages and was known as a stopping place for eggs and butter for the emerging holidaymaker trade. The building fell into decline and burnt down in the early 1890s. Remnants of the flint wall that formed a courtyard around the building can still be seen on the river bank. After the loss of this building the St Benet's Abbey site remained uninhabited.

Excavation and research

No excavation has taken place at the site. A geophysical survey using magnetic and earth resistance measurements was undertaken in 2014 at St Benet's Abbey to evaluate the survival of sub-surface features. The results indicated that little survives of buildings immediately south of the church (i.e. the claustral buildings) probably due to extensive robbing.

In the lower lying ground to the south evidence for foundations of an extensive range of buildings was found, possibly orientated to the line of an earlier inner- precinct wall. The site of a possible cemetery to the north of the church was identified. To the eastern margins an extensive network of land drainage features were identified.

Norfolk Archaeological Trust ownership

The importance of St Benet's Abbey was recognised when it became one of Britain's first Scheduled Ancient Monuments in 1915. Much of the 20th century, however, saw worry about maintenance and conservation. Eventually, the Norfolk Archaeological Trust bought most of the precinct in 2002. In 2004 the Trust bought the gatehouse too, thus bringing the site back under the management of a single body. Only the ruins of the church itself are still owned by the diocese, but they are leased to the Trust for 99 years. Much important conservation work has followed, including works to control erosion of the river bank by the wash from passing boats.



The Bishop of Norwich arrives for the annual service at St Benet's (Susan White)



Further information

'St Benet's Abbey: a geophysical investigation', a report by David Bescoby MIfA 15th October 2014 – download from NAT website
Online: Sister website dedicated to St Benet's Abbey www.stbenetsabbey.org

Guidebook, published by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust and available at local shops in Ludham, Ludham Bridge and Horning

Other books

Aston, M., 2000. *Monasteries in the Landscape* (Stroud, Tempus)

Coppack, G., 2006. *Abbeys and Priors* (Stroud, Tempus)

Pestell, T., 2005. 'Monasteries', in T. Ashwin and A. Davison (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Norfolk*, 3rd edition (Chichester, Phillimore), 66–7

Pestell, T., 2004. *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation: The Establishment of Religious Houses in East Anglia, c. 650–1200* (Woodbridge, Boydell)

Location

St Benet's Abbey, Horning, Norwich, NR12 8NJ



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