



## A short history of Binham Priory

**The Priory Church of St Mary and the Holy Cross at Binham lies in a quiet corner of the north Norfolk landscape. It is one of Norfolk's finest monastic sites.**

**A Benedictine monastery was founded here soon after the Norman Conquest by Pierre de Valognes and his wife. The Priory dominated Binham and the surrounding area until it was suppressed in 1539 during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries.**

**The nave of the Priory has been the parish church of Binham since medieval times. Although altered in many ways, it is still a very beautiful and important building of the 12th and 13th centuries, and the ruins of the monastic complex survive well.**

We do not know when Pierre and Albreda de Valognes founded the Priory but it was probably early in the Norman period, perhaps in the 1090s. De Valognes was a Norman aristocrat who was given estates at Binham and in the surrounding area. The first known prior, Osgod, is named in a document of 1106. Like Norwich Cathedral Priory, Binham was a Benedictine house. Benedictine monasteries were well endowed and the monks themselves were usually from wealthy families. Originally there were only eight monks. The Order of St Benedict placed great value on work, as well as prayer and spiritual study, but servants would have done most of the manual labour required by the monastery.

### Building the Priory

Building of the monastic church began at the east end, probably before 1100, and gradually moved westward. The cores of the walls and columns are of flint rubble, and the fine limestone facing stone from Caen (Normandy) and Barnack (near Peterborough) were brought most of the way by water. The westernmost part of the nave was probably being built c. 1190, at a time when Gothic pointed arches were starting to replace round-headed Norman ones.

The west front of the Priory probably dates to c. 1220-45, and the period of Prior Richard de Parco. Although now damaged (the lower part of the great west window fell into disrepair and was bricked up in the early 19th century), this is one of the finest

pieces of medieval architecture in Norfolk. The tracery in the window is some of the earliest in England, along with examples at Westminster Abbey. The entire west front was restored in 1987-90.



*The beautiful architectural detailing and window tracery of the west front (1226-44) (Trevor Ashwin)*

### Life at the Priory

The history of the Priory was eventful, and not always characterised by high spiritual standards. The monks often

quarrelled with the village and with the Priory's 'mother house', the Abbey of St Albans. One dispute with the Abbot of St Albans in 1212 led to a full-scale siege. In 1335 a prior had to flee after investing the Priory's wealth in alchemy experiments. In the 14th century there may have been as many as 14 monks but their number then declined, as did the Priory's income.



The cloister today. (Trevor Ashwin)

## After the Dissolution

At the Dissolution in 1539 there were only six monks. The nave was retained as the parish church but the rest of the complex, including the entire east end of the church, was sold to the Paston family. They demolished the choir, transepts and monastic buildings and sold or re-used much of the fine building stone. In fact, much of this stone can be seen in buildings that still stand in the village today. The south nave aisle was demolished and the arcade openings walled in. A wall was erected across the east end of the nave, on top of the medieval choir screen, to mark the new east end of the church.

The Office of Works carried out major excavations and consolidation of the ruins in the 1930s in the cloister and surrounding ranges

The state of the church deteriorated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the north aisle was demolished in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The great west window was partly blocked up in 1809. Only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the building restored, with the replacement of the timber roof, and the restoration of the original floor levels - which had been built up over many years in a failed attempt at fighting damp.

In the 1920s and 1930s the old Office of Works was acquiring a considerable number of castles and monasteries which it then cleared and conserved and opened to the public. Norfolk Archaeological Trust raised money through a public appeal

to buy the earthworks of the cloisters and the east end of the church at Binham, and the site was then passed into the guardianship of the Office of Works – English Heritage in its current form - on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1933. Clearance of the cloisters and surrounding buildings and the east end of the church took place under the supervision of Henry Neville of Tasburgh Hall every summer from 1934 to 1938. Work finished just before the outbreak of war.

## Excavations and research

After the Trust acquired the cloister ruins in 1933, there were several seasons of excavation by the Office of Works. These revealed the cloisters – along with the east end of the church, the heart of any medieval monastery – and the buildings surrounding it. These included the chapter house (where monks held their business meetings), the monks' parlour (or sitting room), the warming room (with a fireplace) and an upstairs dormitory with a vaulted undercroft below. Leading off the dormitory was the reredorter (toilets).

On the south side of the cloisters was the refectory (dining room), with kitchens behind. To the west lay storerooms and accommodation for the prior and his guests. Traces of other unexcavated structures spread out into the surrounding meadow beyond the area excavated in the 1930s. Although thorough, the 1930s excavation was not conducted to modern standards, and huge amounts of rubble were shovelled away en masse to expose the medieval plan.



Clearance work in progress in 1936

An undated, anonymous typed note from the Ministry of Works files on Binham states:

*In 1934 the Department commenced to trace the plan of the Priory and to preserve the ruin against further depreciation and neglect. When the monument was transferred under the Act, there was little or no indication of the general layout of the Benedictine Priory. Since that date the Lady Chapel, Chancel, Chapter House, Dorter Range, Cloisters, Southern and part of Eastern Ranges of Claustrial buildings, have been exposed, and much of the masonry preserved. The Department's ultimate object is to expose the whole plan of the Benedictine Priory... Amongst discoveries may be mentioned the unique treatment of the Chapter House shafts and vaulting, also important finds of 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>-century stained glass.*

On 17 October 1938, P.K. Baillie Reynolds of the Office of Works wrote that 'the excavations here are almost complete', and work finished just before the outbreak of war.

Whatever records may have been made at the time did not survive the war or the sudden death of the excavator, Henry Neville of Tasburgh Hall. Neville had retired from the Indian Civil Service and, as far as we can tell, had no archaeological training and probably did not recognise the need to make records. Some artefacts were kept, however, and form part of the collections of the Norfolk Museum and Archaeology Service in Norwich, whilst the carved stone is held by English Heritage.

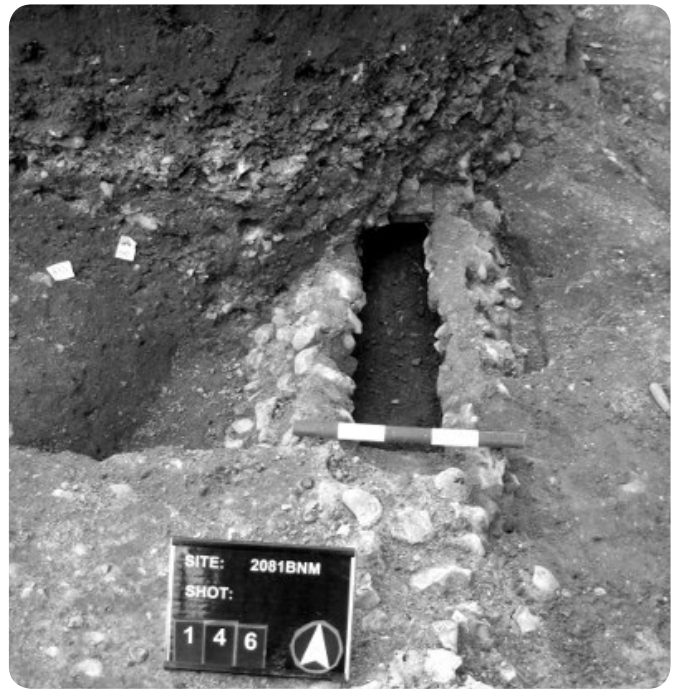
Excavations were also undertaken in 1964 at the external angle of the south and west claustral ranges where a thick mortar and flint raft, overlain by sixteenth-century refuse from the adjacent kitchens, was identified.

An excavation in 2007 along the line of the collapsed precinct wall, adjacent to the gatehouse, was designed to identify the original course. In 2008, excavations of areas associated with access to the new visitor building within the north aisle, and service trenches across the modern graveyard were carried out. Other works included the excavation of pits for four new interpretation panels within the ruins of the claustral ranges, and excavation within the gatehouse during road surfacing and path resurfacing to the church.



Area B. Foundations of the precinct wall (Scale 2m)

Purbeck Marble grave slab (Scale 10cm)



Area G. Phase 3.3 drain after excavation (Scale 50cm)

Amongst the discoveries was an early burial located beneath the 12th-century wall of the north aisle. Radiocarbon dating of one of the bones provided a date range of AD 770–970. Another burial, dug through the first, also seems to pre-date the construction of the Norman church. Their presence suggests that there may have been a pre-Conquest church, though whether this was a Saxon minster or monastic community is unprovable.

A large pit was found outside the west end of the church and was probably contemporary with the construction of the 12th-century church. Its size suggests a quarry pit, extracting chalk and perhaps flint for building. There was evidence for burning on the side of the pit, and perhaps it was used to burn the chalk to create lime mortar. A rudimentary lime kiln was discovered in a similar position in front of the church at North Elmham, excavated by Peter Wade Martins.

A drain from the kitchen and through the outer parlour was found adjacent to the west end of the church. The projected course of this drain would take it northwards through the graveyard and out into the field beyond, draining into the Stiffkey River. The drain seems to have replaced earlier ditches, which may also have sub-divided the precinct. A bridge-like structure just in front of the west door seems to have provided a crossing point into the church.

Two parallel ditches to the west of the church may indicate the position of an early route into the precinct. On the same alignment, the wall enclosing the yard west of the prior's lodgings continued south-east as a modern field boundary skirting the claustral ranges. The enclosure map of 1815 shows a footpath along the same route, which is still in use today.

Excavations along the course of the precinct wall revealed evidence for a building within a yard surrounded by an earthwork boundary to the south and building to the east. The building abutted the 15th-century gatehouse and was probably contemporary with, or later than, that structure. The building's function is unknown but possibilities include a stable, barn or almonry. Few artefacts were found in the demolition layers, suggesting the area was kept clean.

At the north-east corner of this enclosure lies the earthwork remains of a rectangular building, from which some demolition material was retrieved during the investigations. Again, function of this structure is unclear though Richard de Parco's works included a wall from the gatehouse to the chapel of St Thomas, which would accord well with the layout of the remains. A second gateway leading to an inner court may provide an alternative explanation.

## Norfolk Archaeological Trust ownership

Since 1933 the Norfolk Archaeological Trust has owned a large part of the ruined areas of the monastic precinct, including the eastern part of the monastery church and the cloister and surrounding buildings.

The gatehouse was not included in the Guardianship area and it stood until 2002 largely invisible under the ivy. In the early 2000s the Trust bought the gatehouse, the adjacent meadow and precinct wall and these were repaired as part of the Binham Priory Access and Conservation Project in partnership with Binham PCC, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage.



## Further information

### Online:

The Priory has its own informative website at [www.binhampriory.org](http://www.binhampriory.org)

East Anglian Archaeology 104, 2003: Earthworks of Norfolk, by Brian Cushion and Alan Davison  
<http://eaareports.org.uk/publication/report104/>

Guidebook on sale at the church:

Hundleby, A.R., 2004. The Priory Church of St Mary and the Holy Cross and the Monastic Precinct, Binham, Norfolk (Binham PCC)

### Other reading:

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:

Binham Priory, Warham Road, Binham, Fakenham, NR21 0DQ



Website: [norfarchtrust.org.uk](http://norfarchtrust.org.uk) | Facebook: [NorfArchTrust](https://www.facebook.com/NorfArchTrust) | Twitter: [@NorfArchTrust](https://twitter.com/NorfArchTrust) | Email: [info@norfarchtrust.org.uk](mailto:info@norfarchtrust.org.uk)

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