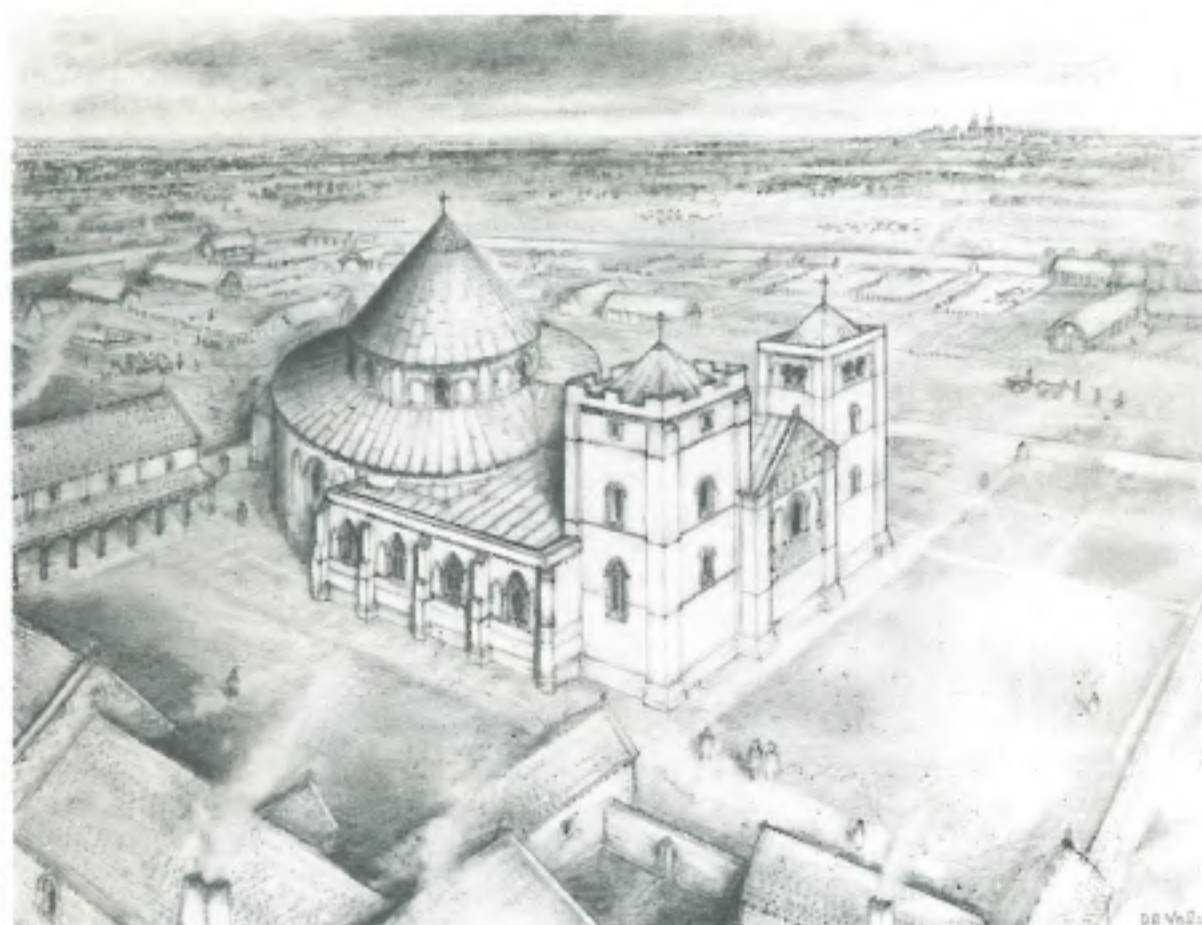


Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No.25

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLARS AT TEMPLE BRUER AND ASLACKBY



Reconstruction view of Temple Bruer from the south-east c. 1400. (David Vale)

Temple Bruer is a large parish on the Lincoln Heath about 6 miles (10km) north of Sleaford. It now consists of a few scattered farms and has no obvious centre, but at Temple Farm there are substantial remains of the Preceptory of the Knights Templars, founded in c.1150-60, and one of the first colonists of this former wilderness. 'Bruer' comes from the Norman-French word for 'Heath'.

About 12 miles (20 km) south of Sleaford lies the site of another of the Templars' properties, at Aslackby, founded c.1192. Nothing survives of the buildings except a few carved stones, but old descriptions and sketches show that it was formerly very similar to Temple Bruer.

THE TEMPLARS

The Knights Templars were a curious mixture of soldier and monk, and like the various other 'military' orders they originated at the time of the Crusades, after the capture of

Jerusalem in 1099 and the formation of a Christian Kingdom there. Their first house was established in 1128. The Templars' job was to guard the Shrines of the Holy Land and to protect pilgrims and others. Their main headquarters were in the Holy Land, but in order to raise money and supplies for their work they rapidly established networks of "Commanderies" or "Preceptories" — major estate-centres — in all the countries of Europe, and each country had its own headquarters. The English Order was based at The Temple in London, where the round church still survives among the Lawyers' Chambers between the Thames and Fleet Street. The same type of church with a circular nave occurred at many of the Preceptories, and one survived at Temple Bruer until the mid 18th century. They were designed to imitate the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

In charge of the Preceptory would be a knight, who oversaw the management of estates, the recruitment of new personnel, and the despatch of money and supplies to the Holy Land. He would be accompanied by one or more priests or chaplains who said masses and maintained the religious side. All these, including the Knight, took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and lived according to a rule much like that of the Cistercian monks. The medieval mind saw no conflict between the religious and military sides, and the chaste religious knight was in some ways the highest medieval ideal.

The hard labour around the estate would be carried out by paid servants and tenants. At Temple Bruer it seems that the Templars colonized the waste and deliberately established a village nearby to supply the labour. The names of many of the inhabitants of this village are known from a late 12th century document, and it appears that most of them were incomers from neighbouring villages. A weekly market began to be held in the 1170s. At Aslackby there was already a village with a church and castle, and labour presented no problem.

In 1308 the French Templars were accused of heresy by King Philip IV, and the order throughout Europe was dissolved in 1312. The motive was probably jealousy of their huge and efficiently run estates.



Lead bulla of the Knights Hospitallers found at Hagnaby and now in the City and County Museum, Lincoln.

In England much of the Templars' property passed into the hands of the Hospitallers, another military Order whose function was to provide hospitals and accommodation for weary, sick or poor pilgrims. We know little of the management of Temple Bruer or Aslackby under the Hospitallers, though the later buildings at Temple Bruer were their work. It is likely that for much of the 15th and early 16th century the lands were leased to tenants. Temple Bruer was run jointly with the Commandery at Eagle, near Lincoln, and there was a Preceptor, a Squire, two chaplains and a clerk in residence in 1338, but in 1539 the buildings were said to be in ruins. When Henry VIII made his progress through Lincolnshire, however, in 1540, there was sufficient suitable accommodation here for him and his retinue to spend the night. Additional space was provided by tents.

Aslackby was not made a Commandery after 1312. The Hospitallers' land here were leased out, and then later on run from Temple Bruer, so that the buildings ceased to be put to anything but secular uses.

The Hospitallers in turn were dissolved in 1540-1 and much of the Temple Bruer estates passed into the hands of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. In about 1600 the property was bought by Richard Brownlow. An example of the quantity of land involved is given by one item

' all that messuage called the Shepegrene containing 2000 acres, belonging to Temple Bruer'

Aslackby lands were granted to Lord Clinton, who also acquired Sempringham Priory.

PROPERTY OF TEMPLE BRUER AND ASLACKBY

Templars' Preceptories were great estate centres, designed to farm efficiently large areas of countryside and to send the profits abroad. They seem to have used a version of the Cistercian grange system, working large blocks of land from specially constructed farm-houses as well as owning strips within the common fields in the more usual manorial system. At the Preceptory of South Witham, Lincolnshire, excavated in 1969, a considerable proportion of the buildings were found to be directly connected with agriculture, storing the harvested crops for distribution. Sheep and cattle clearly played a large part in the economy, though the centralized accounting of the Templars disguises the size of the operation. The position of Temple Bruer gave it access to the huge sheepwalks on the Heath — upwards of 1000 local sheep were shorn here c.1330 in addition to others brought here from elsewhere — while Aslackby no doubt enjoyed common rights in the Fen.

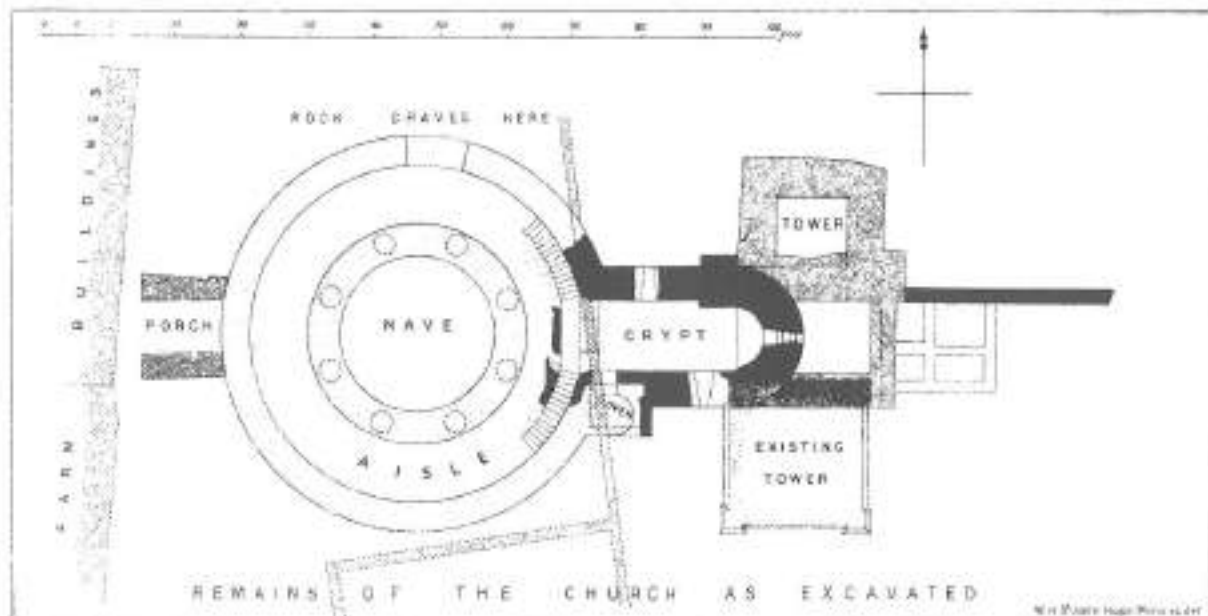
Land owned by the Templars has left us with a legacy of field and place-names such as Temple Hill and Temple Croft which were obviously named before 1312. Earlier antiquaries were frequently misled by such names into believing that these were the sites of Roman temples!

Temple Bruer was the second richest Preceptory in England c.1308, with an income of over £177. Under the Hospitallers its income was slightly higher, but due to inflation, its real value slumped considerably.

EXCAVATIONS AT TEMPLE BRUER

Two excavations have taken place at Temple Bruer. The first, in or before 1833, was carried out by Rev. G. Oliver, vicar of Scopwick. Much of his writings consist of very good original research, shot through by sheer fantasy, and his description of Temple Bruer has to be examined against this background. He uncovered the foundations of the round church which Samuel Buck had engraved in 1726 and noted that it consisted of an inner circle carried on arches by eight cylindrical columns surrounded by an outer round aisle. The main doorway lay to the west, with a porch, approached by a flight of steps. Underneath the church were a series of vaults, in which he claimed were a number of skeletons showing marks of violence. The walls of some of the subterranean chambers were burnt, and the whole suggested to his lurid imaginations that this was the evidence of some of the horrid practices which the Templars indulged in, and which led to their downfall. He also traced buildings to the south, which he designated as cloisters, while some distance to the west he noted the presence of two high mounds, known as the 'Bar Gates' which he believed covered the remains of the main gate-towers.

The more prosaic excavations carried out by St. John Hope in 1907 suggest that Oliver had not been present for the whole of his excavation and that he had accepted wholeheartedly the exaggerated stories told by his workmen. Hope demonstrated once more the existence of the circular nave and western porch, but discovered in addition that the surviving tower to the south-east of the nave had once been matched by another to the north-east, and that both had flanked a narrow **Choir or Presbytery**. This choir had originally ended in an **apse**, but in the late 12th century it had been extended a further 14



TEMPLE BRUER, LINCOLNSHIRE. PLAN OF CHURCH, ETC.

Plan of the Preceptory church at Temple Bruer as excavated in 1907 by W.H. St. John Hope (by courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London)

feet (4.3 m) to the east, ending with a straight north-south wall. A northern tower had been added as part of this extension, to be followed shortly afterwards by the southern tower (which still survives), the northern wall of which overlay the footings of both apse and extended choir. It is possible that the north wall of the tower is in fact part of the south wall of the new choir and hence older than the rest of the tower which incorporates it. The final alteration to the church appears to have been the addition of a large chapel to the south, occupying the space between the nave and the southern tower. There was little evidence for this on the ground but the roof-chase cut into the west wall of the tower, and Buck's view of 1726 suggest its presence. Where Oliver claimed to have discovered passages and vaults Hope found only two staircases running down within the eastern sides of the nave aisle and giving access to a crypt under the original choir, a feature repeated in other medieval churches and cathedrals. Because of the slope of the ground from west to east the crypt was only partly below ground-level, while the choir was considerably raised.

The North View of Temple Bruer in the Middle of the Great Ruins in the Same Wall of the Choir of Lincoln.



North view of Temple Bruer by Samuel Buck, 1726. This is the only illustration of the round nave to survive.



The village of Aslackby c. 1835, from an engraving by W. Watkins after a sketch by J.B. Topham.

The tower of Aslackby Preceptory from a water-colour drawing by Hon. John Byng, 1791. (by courtesy of Lincolnshire Library Service)

To the south of the present farm a long building was located running east-west. At its western end, and inside, was a square foundation which Hope interpreted as that of a conduit bringing water into the enclosure. Further to the west, in a field, the precinct wall was uncovered and with it traces of other buildings. The present farm buildings cover the site of most of the domestic buildings of the Preceptory, such as barns and stables. Only the tower, and parts of a long north-south building incorporated in the present farmhouse, survive today above ground.

THE SITES TODAY

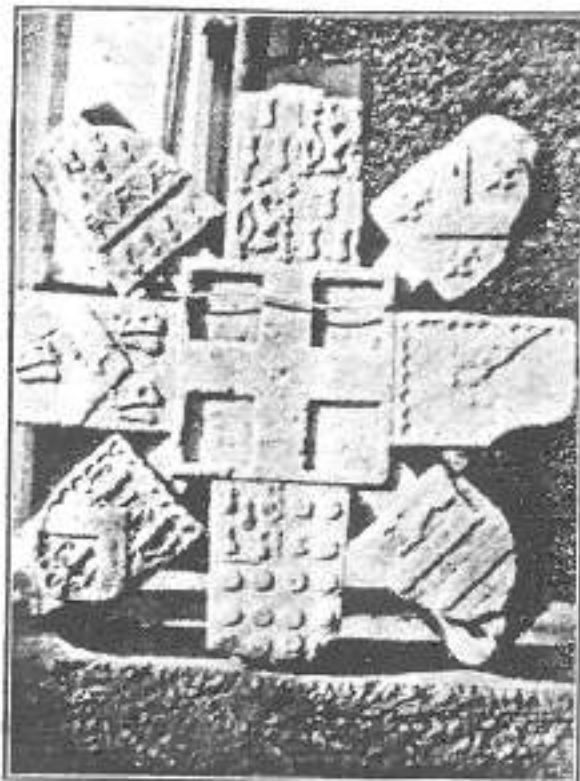
At Aslackby nothing survived today above ground except for a number of carved stones built up into the present farm-house. In the late 18th century the round church had probably already gone: Richard Gough the historian recorded in 1789 that it had been rebuilt as a farmhouse. The tower, which was square and embattled and stood on the south side of the nave, had a lower storey with a groined vault, the centre boss of which bore eight shields. It appears to have been somewhat later than the Temple Bruer tower. There was also a blocked arch at ground level. Its upper floor, or floors, was open to the sky, but shortly before 1789 was fitted up as a room by the owner, Mr. Douglas. John Byng, touring Lincolnshire in 1791, saw and sketched the tower. He writes:

'At Aslackby, somewhat out of the road, stands a turreted building, call'd the Temple, from being I suppose, part of a preceptory belonging to the Knights Templars, and of such places I know several bearing this name.

I was civilly shewn into the lower room, now a dairy, curiously arch'd with stone, and with coats of arms in the centre. Around this house was a great park, well timber'd and stock'd with deer, which was destroyed about eighty years ago.'

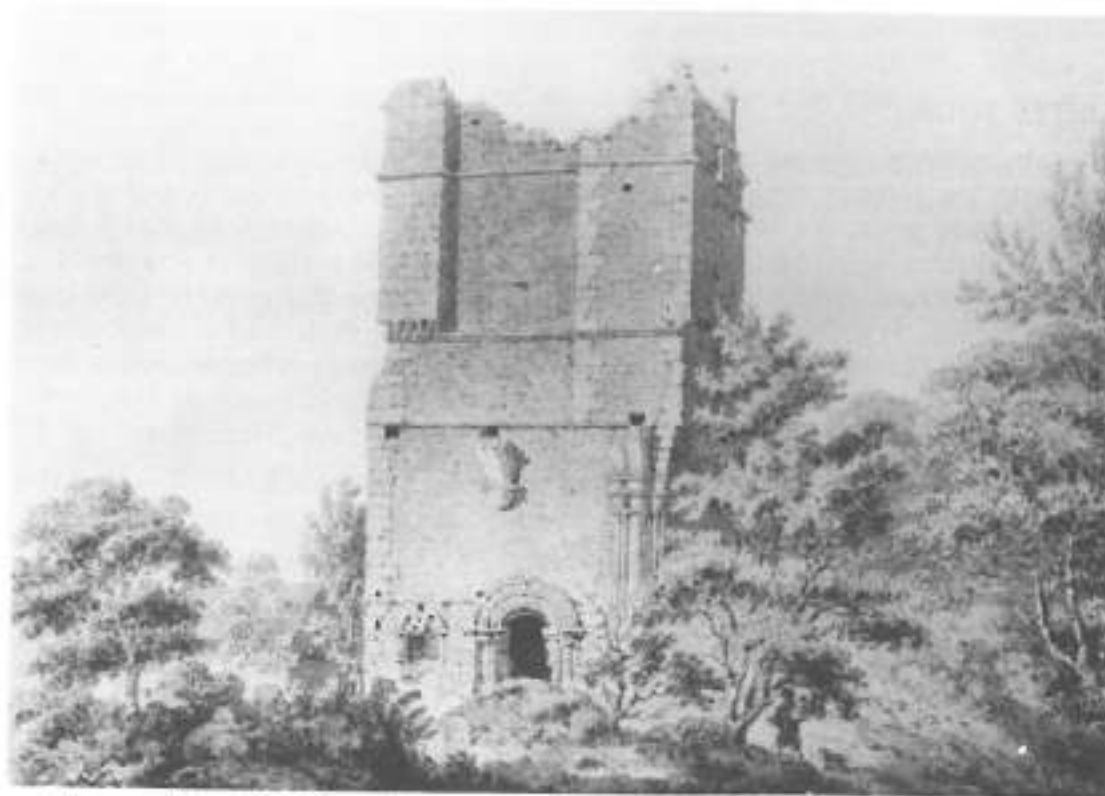
This tower survived until 1891, when it was demolished. A number of architectural fragments were taken to a garden in Horbling.

More survives at Temple Bruer. The round church seen by Buck in 1726, had been demolished before 1774 when Thomas Quincey visited the site, and so for more than two centuries the south-east tower has stood alone. It is not known how long the north-east tower survived — it may indeed have disappeared within the late 12th century, and it is



Stone boss from the vault of the Templars' tower at Aslackby. In the centre is the Templars' cross, surrounded by arms of benefactors.

notable that only the south chapel can be dated much after 1200 AD. The greater part of the church must have remained in its Norman form right up to the Dissolution in 1541.



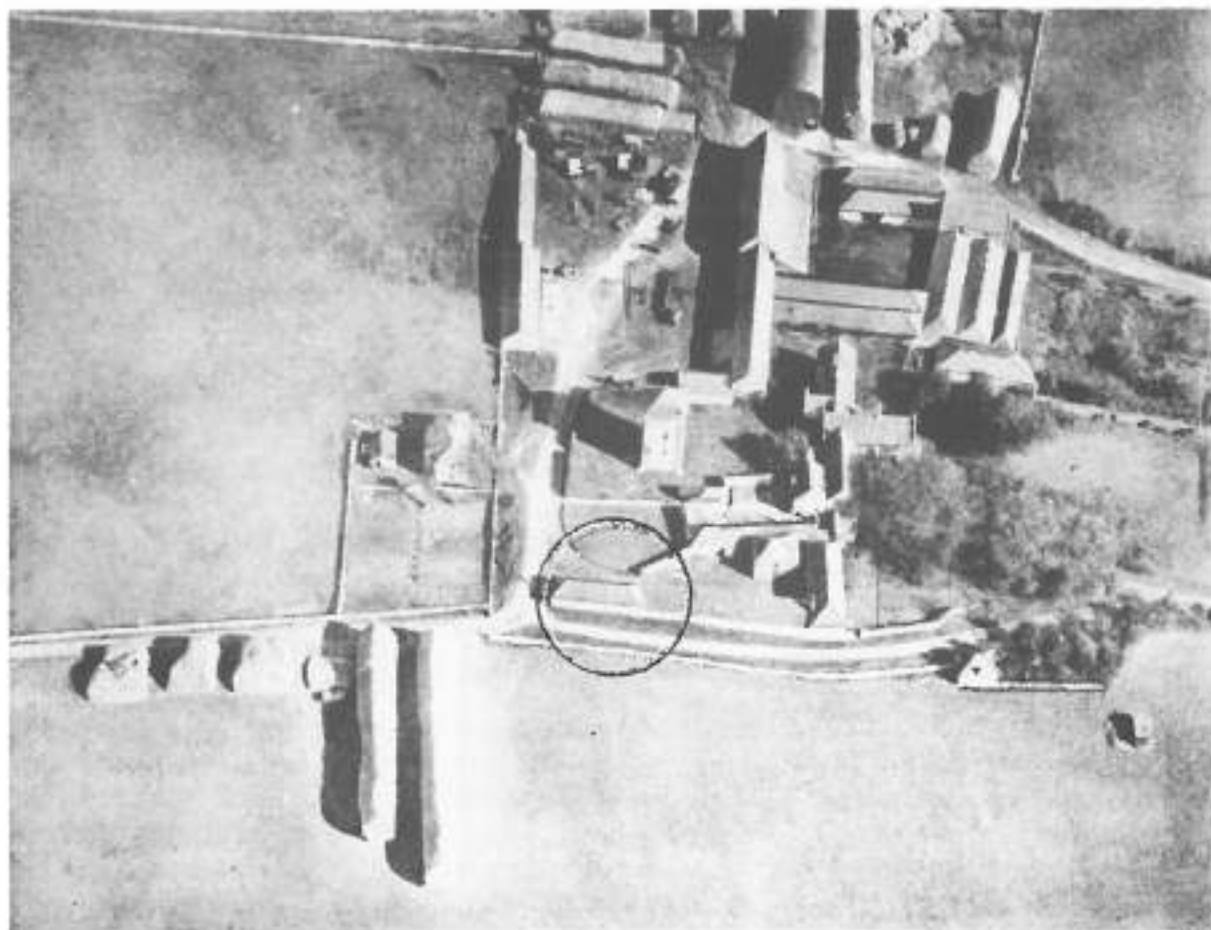
Temple Bruer: the tower from the north by Thomas Hearne (1744-1817). The original is in the Usher Gallery, Lincoln.

The tower was in great decay last century, but was roofed and strengthened by Charles Chaplin. The roof cannot long have survived for by 1908 it was once more in bad

condition. The present roof, constructed c.1912, is an odd conical construction, a good deal wider and lower than the original, which was carried up inside the battlements. Considerable repairs were carried out in 1961 by the Kesteven County Council, the Ministry of Works, and the owner, Mr. J.E. Mountain. Because of the position of the crypt the north doorway is somewhat raised, and it is now approached by a flight of steps. The tower is quite plain, with flat pilaster buttresses at the corners. It is of three storeys, the lower two originally vaulted. Access is via a doorway on the north side which led from the choir and the south and west walls of the ground floor have rows of sedilia and a piscina suggesting that this may have served as a private chapel and chapter house. In the north west corner a spiral stair gives access to the upper floors, the purpose of which is unknown. The doorway and windows are in Transitional Norman style except for the lower south window which is of late 13th or early 14th century date. Next to the north door on the outside are the remains of a double piscina serving the High Altar. On the wall of the spiral stair are scratched the outlines of a pair of medieval ploughs.

One other building survives in part. This is a rectangular thick-walled structure which forms part of the present farm-house. In 1976 a 15th century doorway was uncovered in its west wall, and the building was presumably part of the living quarters of the Preceptory after its take-over by the Hospitallers.

To the south east of the farm, on the far side of the road, air-photography has recently shown the position of the medieval village dependant on the Preceptory: it consists of a row of heavily-ploughed house platforms running along a dry valley in a south-easterly direction. The position of the gatehouse, for which permission to fortify was obtained in 1306, remains to be found, as do the sites of the dovecote and windmill.



Aerial photograph of Temple Bruer from the west taken in the 1920s or 30s. The circle marks the position of the nave.

The surviving tower at Temple Bruer is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (County no. 43) and is in the guardianship of Lincolnshire County Council. It is open at all reasonable times, free of charge. Visitors should note that access is through the farmyard and great care should be taken.

GLOSSARY

Apse a semi-circular end to a building.

Chapter-house a room where the private business of a monastery etc. was carried out.

Choir east end of the church, in this case for the exclusive use of the Preceptor and Chaplains.

Conduit a storage tank and pipes for water.

Crypt an underground or semi-underground chamber, often used as a chapel or for relics.

Grange a compact block of land run from a centralized farmhouse.

Rule a way of monastic life eg. as set out by St. Benedict

Sedilia elaborate built-in stone seats for clergy etc.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the kindness of Mr. David Vale in producing the reconstruction on the cover.

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