Abbeys of the Witham Valley

by Andrew White
Lincolnshire County Council
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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, Tuxford, Tuxford and Northolme.

Of all the activity and wealth little indication survives. In 1536 after 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 monks were implicated and greater pains were taken here than elsewhere after the Dissolution to make sure that never more 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 woods are private property and that unsympathetic behaviour might close them to future visitors. In particular please remember to shut all gates behind you and to park carefully to avoid blocking access for agricultural vehicles on narrow roads.

FURTHER READING

Victoria County History — Lincolnshire Vol II (1906).
Ordnance Survey — Map of Monastic Britain (South sheet) (1954).
D. M. Owen — Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire (1971).

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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 1929-34. Original in British Museum. (G. K. Bentinck).

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 habit, 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 chancel 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 space surrounded by the living quarters. In the open-sided corridor facing the cloister the monks carried out much of their study and writing. The eastern range contained the sacristy and treasury where the monks kept the vestments, books and valuables of the monastery were kept. The chapter house where the monks gathered once a week for discussion and discipline and the infirmary and warming-house, which contained one of the few fireplaces in the monastery. Over the top of the monastic dormitory. The southern range contained cells or the order of lay brothers and cells for the lay brothers and the head of the house were usually dependent on the monastery. Outside this main group of buildings lay the kitchen, the baker's kitchen, the storehouse, the barn, the windmill 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 gateway.

Simplified plan of monastery, based on that of Bardney Abbey

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

In 1536 the monastery was impounded 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 rebel. For this the Abbey and four canons were later executed and none of the other canons received a pardon 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 these 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 carrying away the stones and much has fallen, or been pulled down, within these 3 years. In the south-east corner of the precinct are series of long channels flanked by high banks, forming fishponds. 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 priest 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 monastery was dissolved, several of the nuns being transferred to the refounded Stowford Priory, which survived until 1539. A few of the ex-nuns were still receiving pensions thirty years later.

After the Dissolution the Tythwilt 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 1539, says 'The monks hold opinion that the old Abbey of Bardney was not in the very same place where the new ys, but at a graunge or dayre of theys a style'

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 entire 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 16th 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.

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 3/4 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.

Stetwellord Priory, 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 resolved pensions. John Leland, writing shortly after this, records that 'Sir Christopher Woldingsby's sun and heyre dwellith now at Tuphholme 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 1726, 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 dovecot farm buildings.

STIXWOUCHILD PRIORY

Founded in about 1135 by Lucy, Countess of Chester, Stictwoulde 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 Steinfeldon, and was refounded once more in 1537 under the Premonstratensian order. It was not finally dissolved until 1539, when the process and fourteen nuns received pensions. The site of the Priory passed to Sir Robert Tyrwhitt, a great buyer of monastic land locally.

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 1846 to build a new church at Woodhall Spa. Some fragments of carved stone and coffin lids are preserved in Stixwould 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 1339 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 1337 the Abbot and three monks were executed for their part in the Lincolnshire Rising and in the same year the Abbey was dissolved, and 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 medieval 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 Almwick 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 1552. 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 church as it 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. Beer 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 thatched house, to which is attached the remains of a Tudor stone house. (An alternative and quieter route may be taken by car or cycle 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 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.

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 'Langweyse 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 Stainton. The site of the Priory is now occupied by a 13th century successor to the Tudor house of the Tyworths, 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 by the gate on the track and the next gate on your right. Approaching the site from this path towards the more on the mounds of spoil fromje 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.

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

In two miles, past a sharp bend in the road, you will see the ruins of Tresholmo 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 ceilings. Facing this you are the building with the site of the cloister and church behind you. Passing through a doorway in this wall you will enter a dovecot farm-yard with buildings abutting on the outer face of the Refectory wall. Behind the left-hand range of buildings is a small wooded site covered with trees, perhaps representing the Abbot's Lodging.

From Tresholmo continue along the same road through Bucknall, then take the lane on the right, which meanders across a drain and back again. Stowwood Priory is a confused set of earthworks on private land (no access) behind Abbey Farm, the large farm on your right. Stochwood 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 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 road 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.1192 which can be followed all the way to Lincoln, via Branston and Carwick. Necton Priory, the only monastery on this site of the Witham valley north of Martin, lies to the west of Necton 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 Steepwash Grange in Carwick as well as the nearby quarry 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.