

THE MANOR AND ABBEY OF BURNHAM

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Historical and archaeological evidence is adduced to support the view that Burnham Abbey was originally housed in the manor house of the Manor of Burnham, and that the surviving remains occupy that site. A number of archaeological discoveries made by the authors are reported, amplifying and correcting the last published account, which appeared in 1903.

In 1903 Harold Brakspear made an invaluable investigation of Burnham Abbey.¹ In the intervening years some of the features which he recorded have disappeared, fresh ones have been discovered, and in a few instances, when farm sheds, which must have hampered his investigations very much, have been pulled down it has been found that minor corrections needed to be made. Also, as knowledge of English monastic sites has grown, the presence of the moat has come to be recognised as an unusual feature since the boundary of the precincts was customarily marked by a wall.² Moreover, although the moat coincides with the boundary wall on the east and west, on the north it does not. This raises the question of whether the moat is in fact older than the Abbey. In this article it is proposed first to give a brief history of the Manor of Burnham to see if the moat could possibly have belonged to an earlier manor house, then to describe the north arm of the moat in more detail and finally to record new facts which have come to light recently when a new drainage system was installed and restoration work was undertaken on part of the medieval east range of the Abbey.

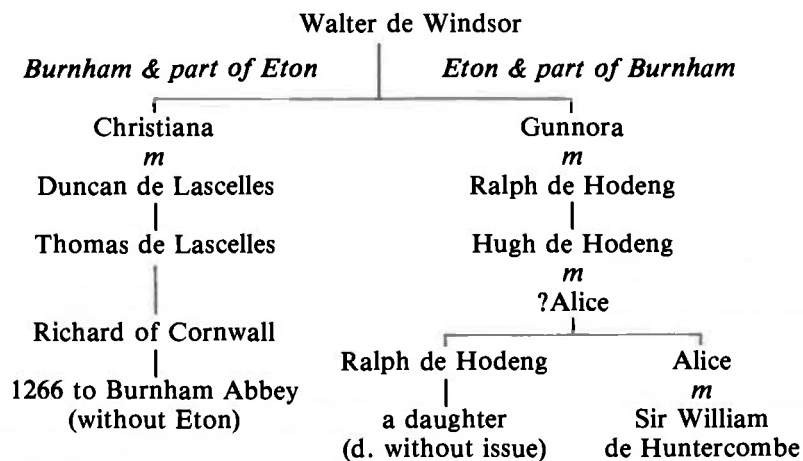
Burnham Manor

At the time of the Domesday Survey there were two manors in the parish of Burnham, that of Burnham to the west, which included Burnham village, and East Burnham.³ The manor of Burnham had belonged to Elma the thegn who was said to have been killed at the Battle of Hastings and this, together with the manor of Eton, was granted to William Fitz Otho, castellan of Windsor Castle.

In the middle of the twelfth century William's family took the surname of 'de Windsor' and on the death of Walter de Windsor in about the year 1204⁴ the land was divided between his two daughters, Christiana and Gunnora. Christiana was granted the larger part, which was still entitled 'the Manor of Burnham', with a secondary manor at Eton; her younger sister received the main manor at Eton and part of the Manor of Burnham. Christiana married Duncan de Lascelles and bore him a son, Thomas, and a daughter, also Christiana.⁵ Gunnora married Ralph de Hodeng.

Thomas de Lascelles alienated the main manor to Richard of Cornwall, brother of Henry III. Through Gunnora's grand-daughter Alice, the smaller manor came by marriage to Sir William de Huntercombe, whose name it still bears. The descent of the manor is set out on the facing page.

In the Barons' War, Richard of Cornwall was captured at the Battle of Lewes, and when he was in captivity he vowed to found an abbey if he survived. He was released on 6th September 1265 and the foundation charter of Burnham Abbey was signed on 18th April 1266. Two months later Margery of Aston, sub-prioress of Goring Priory was elected Abbess. It is conceivable that together with her companions she then moved into makeshift wooden buildings, as was often the case when a religious house was founded, but it is important to bear in mind that this was a house of nuns and not monks. Moreover, it was a comparatively late foundation and the rules of enclosure were becoming increasingly strict.⁶



The reasons for this were complex but one of them was that houses of women were very vulnerable, and it is possible that they were able to move in with such speed because there was already a house—perhaps the manor house—standing on the site.

The archaeological evidence for this is discussed below. The point at issue here is whether there is any historical evidence that this particular spot, in the extreme south of the manor, is where the manor house is likely to have stood. Here the crucial factor seems to be the position of the demesne land. Fortunately there is ample evidence for this, the central document being the lease made by the Crown, after the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539, to William Tyldesley, groom of the King's Wardrobe.⁷ This lists land which had belonged to the Abbey in Burnham and is now granted to Tyldesley. At first sight many of the field names are unrecognisable but fortunately this land continued to be held by the Crown until the bulk of it was sold in 1834.⁸ (Land in north Burnham was sold in 1805 and 1840.⁹) Therefore a series of leases was drawn up. There is also the Parliamentary Survey of 1649.¹⁰ This has helped very much in understanding how the field names have evolved. The most important surveys were those made in 1800 and 1804 for they have maps attached.¹¹ This has meant that all but seven parcels of the land granted to William Tyldesley have been identified and shows that the Crown kept the Estate intact for

the whole period of its ownership, for there are only three parcels of identifiable land granted to Tyldesley which were not part of the Estate by 1804.

The main part of Tyldesley's lease is headed 'The demesnes of the late monastery of Burnham in the County of Buckingham.' Most of this land lies to the south of Burnham Church and most densely round the Abbey itself. This is corroborated by the tithe survey of 1839 which stated that 'A certain farm and lands' called Burnham Abbey Farm . . . are exempt from the payment of tithes as well great and small having been parcel and possession of the Abbey of Burnham, one of the greater monasteries dissolved by the Act of Dissolution of the monasteries and abbeys and so enjoyed by the Abbey and Convent at the time of the dissolution'. The fields listed tie in with those granted to Tyldesley.

Another valuable document is the 1368 Dower Settlement of the Lady Margaret de Huntercombe.¹² In it the first thirty-seven land assignments appear to refer to Burnham although some of the names have not been identified so far. Those that have are invaluable because they show that strips and parcels of land held by Huntercombe Manor were either in the same field or adjacent to Abbey land. To quote one example: 'Two selions beginning from the first on the north and south sides of a piece of land called Menelondes. They abut on the abbess' pond at the east end.'

The south part of the 1804 Burnham Abbey Estate map (Fig. 1) helps to clarify the above points made about the desmesne land, and the weight of the evidence does suggest that this could have been the site of an earlier manor house, though it is not conclusive. So far no artifacts that can definitely be dated prior to 1266 have been found on the northernmost four acres of the Abbey grounds and it has not been possible to examine the rest of the area, on which now stand three other houses.

Burnham Abbey (Fig. 2)

The moat

The abbey complex was surrounded on three sides by a moat, part of which still survives; much of the remainder can still be traced by observation of where the infill has subsided. The second edition of the twenty-five inch Ordnance Survey Map indicates that the major part survived at the turn of century. Brakspear suggested that the gate house was probably in the north west corner of the precinct, but the Parliamentary Survey of 1649¹³ records a gate house flanked by a palisade on a bank forming the southern boundary, this being the area where Brakspear failed to find any evidence for a moat. He was unable to find any evidence for water to supply the moat but near the north east corner of the abbey precinct, beneath the Tudor garden wall, there is a gully leading to the moat. Prior to the construction of the local water works, according to the memory of elderly local inhabitants there was an appreciable stream flowing from the village in the direction of the abbey; now it is a mere trickle and mostly piped. Margaret Gelling when proposing the origin of the name Burnham said: 'The contours suggest that a stream may once have flowed past Burnham Abbey to the Thames.'¹⁴

The precinct wall to the east and west was erected on the outer rim of the moat whereas to the north it was built approximately fifteen metres beyond the moat. The medieval cob wall survives to the east and a length of brick wall dating from the post-dissolution alterations lies to the north of the frater, but the remainder of the early wall has vanished.

The north side of the moat lies at an angle to the rectangular layout of the abbey buildings, and therefore necessitated modification to the normal shape of the reredorter.

Subsidence of the ground shows that, at one time, the moat existed to the north of the frater between the reredorter and the kitchen. The finished nature of the end of the arch under the reredorter suggests that the enclosing masonry did not continue in front of the frater to form a covered drain.

The kitchen

Brakspear was unable to investigate the kitchen but a number of features indicate that it too was adjusted to the alignment of the moat. Victorian farm workers' cottages were built using the east wall of the kitchen as a foundation but the outer edge of the medieval wall can be traced beneath a flower bed and it is aligned with the orientation of the main buildings. There is a surviving patch of medieval masonry in the north wall of the cottages and when the whole area beyond the buildings was systematically probed there were indications that the north wall of the kitchen was built at an angle of 77° to the east wall. Other indications include the Tudor garden wall which was built at a right angle to the deduced north kitchen wall and an engraving by S. & N. Buck in 1730¹⁵ shows the south wall of the kitchen at a similar angle to the main buildings. In the position where a drain could be anticipated from the alignment of the moat, probing indicated a circular hole in the floor, i.e. the kitchen sluice, and there was an irregular elongated hole which suggested that part of the roof of the drain beneath had collapsed.

Ancient wells have been discovered from time to time, to date seven in number; two of these were adjacent to the kitchen.

It therefore appears that the moat predated the abbey, since there is no apparent reason why it should not have been constructed to conform to the layout of the main abbey buildings. (Strangely if the E-W orientation of the church had been more accurate there would

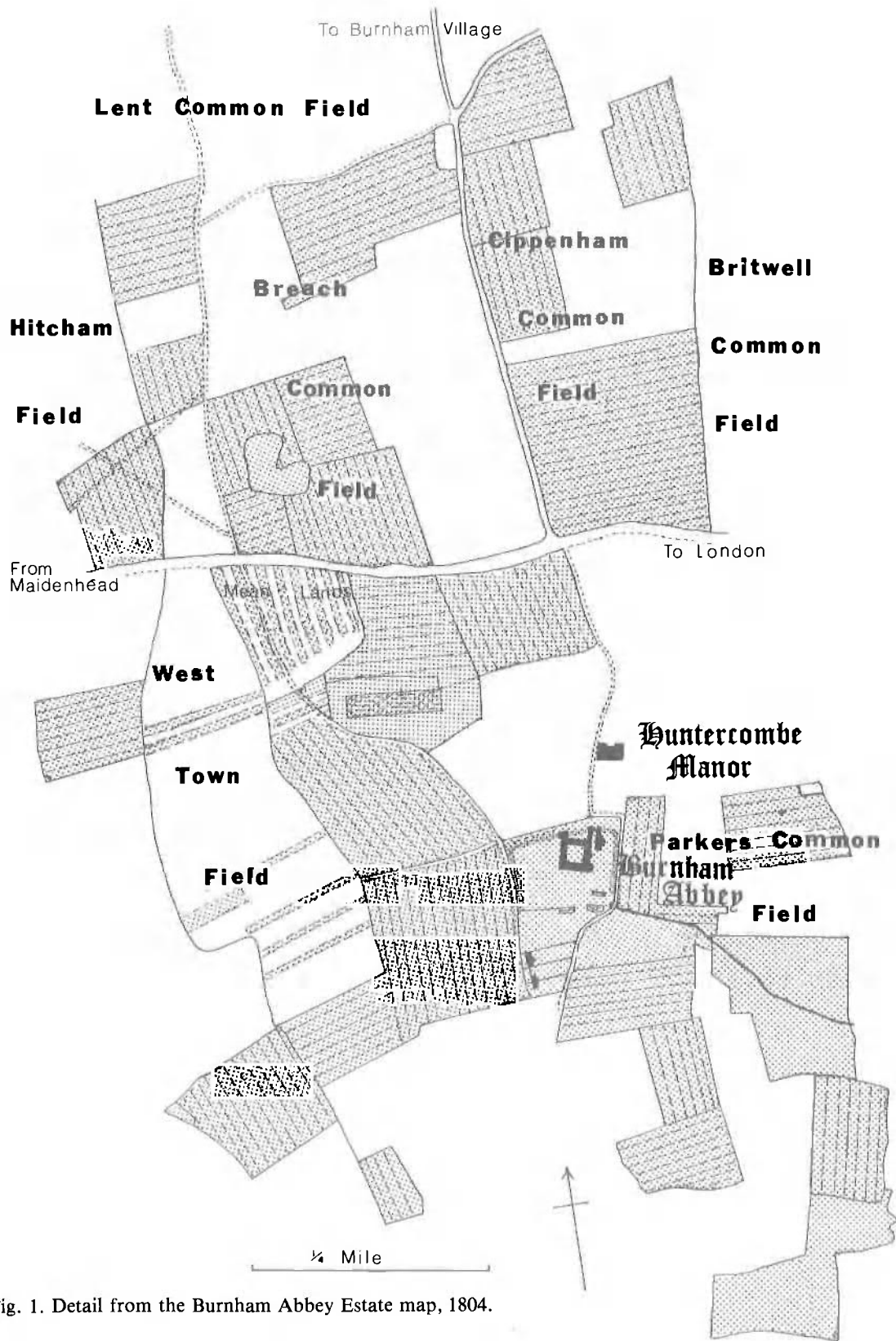


Fig. 1. Detail from the Burnham Abbey Estate map, 1804.

have been no need to adjust the alignment of the reredorter and kitchen). If the moat predates the abbey it follows that a building of some importance probably stood on the site prior to 1266. Burnham manor house is the most likely candidate.

The infirmary

The recent installation of a new drainage system and restoration work have exposed fresh features associated with the infirmary. A pipe was laid parallel to the east wall of the infirmary and the trench exposed the bases of two medieval walls, both running at right angles from it. This led to the discovery of the foundations of an east wall which were of chalk rubble blocks laid on the natural gravel. The indications were that there had been a room four metres by five metres centrally placed on the east wall of the infirmary. This could have been a chapel in view of its eastward orientation and for clarity is referred to as such below. The base of the infirmary fireplace was also discovered beneath the Tudor one. It was probably rebuilt to provide a second fireplace on the upper floor when the infirmary hall was divided into two storeys. The north chapel wall is keyed into the rear of the original fireplace and there are indications that the east wall of the infirmary did not continue, although the Tudor builders continued their wall across the entrance to the chapel. This is significant for it was not customary to block off the chapel from the main infirmary hall.

The medieval walls of the infirmary were built of chalk, that on the interior, where it would have been protected from weathering by plaster and the roof, being of softer quality and doubtless cheaper. The lower levels were constructed of flint set in mortar which in turn, below ground level, were placed on the chalk foundations. The quoin on the exterior north corner of the wall forming the rear of the fireplace was built of chalk but the vulnerable region near the ground level was constructed of a column of square tiles laid flat down to the chalk foundation.

Brakspear, in a footnote, refers to a small window in the east wall at the north end of the infirmary but now that the farm buildings have been removed it can be seen to be a blocked medieval doorway. Judging by the poor quality of the workmanship the blocking took place during the farm period, using any material that came to hand. The blocked interior of a medieval window has also been exposed in the north wall; therefore the infirmary had windows in the north, west and south walls (windows in the south wall are shown in a picture of 1830).

The two walls to the east of the infirmary shown on Brakspear's plan were of poor quality; that to the north was not keyed into the medieval structure and since it is aligned with brickwork in the later fireplace no doubt belongs to that period. The southern wall was indicated by a chalk lens in one side of the trench only and therefore did not protrude more than two metres from the infirmary wall.

The floor of the chapel, infirmary and passage to the main buildings were of tamped or puddled chalk and if the floors were originally of tiles none were exposed in the sections.

The East Range

When the vestry in the east range was refloored in 1974, the doorway into the church was exposed down to the threshold and revealed that, as with the corner of the infirmary fireplace already described, the sides near floor level were protected by incorporating similar columns of square tiles. The doorway, which was two metres high, was blocked later when the floor at the east end of the church was raised, thus leading Brakspear to conclude that it was a barrow hole.

Recent restoration work involved the excavation of a trench one and a half metres deep alongside the original foundations of the east side of the main range of abbey buildings. The foundations, deeper than the bottom of the trench, consisted of chalk blocks, carefully

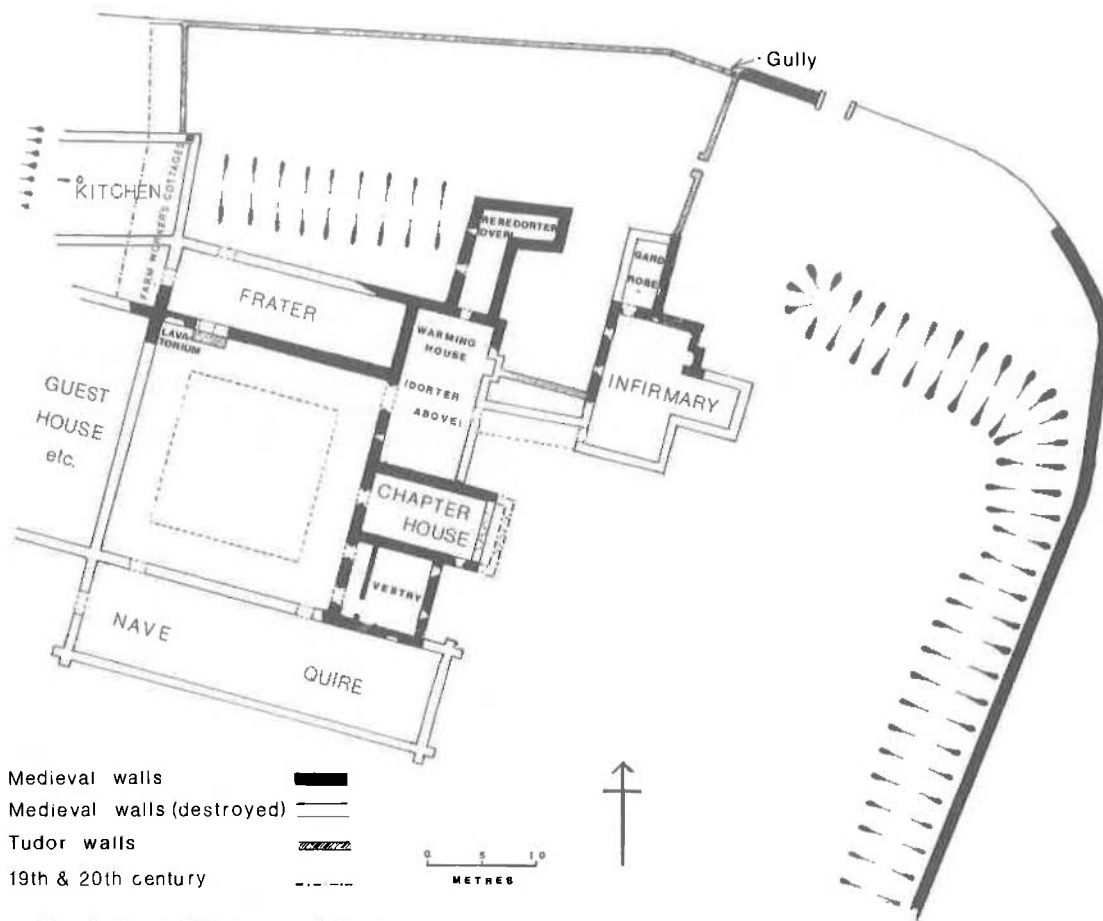


Fig. 2. Plan of Burnham Abbey.

shaped, resembling bricks and well laid in courses. At the entrance to the slype the base of a second wall protruded from the main building. The construction of this foundation was of chalk rubble blocks, as found in the infirmary chapel walls and was not keyed into the main building. It was confirmed that this wall connected with the infirmary, a section being uncovered when a soak-away was dug. Although the restoration trench extended far beyond the site of the slype no second wall appeared, indicating that the roof over the passage must have been a pentice, supported on one side by posts or pillars.

The trench also exposed the exterior of the base of the medieval warming room fireplace which consisted of blocks of greenstone,

probably quarried at Reigate, laid on five courses of tiles which in turn were laid on flint set in mortar.

Past construction work had revealed burials within and to the east of the chapter house. In 1963 a lead coffin was found to the south of the site of the medieval church and recent work revealed four more burials in the same area.

Conclusion

All the available evidence suggests that an earlier manor house did stand on the site of the Abbey. It is interesting and significant that although the buildings were erected on a large, flat piece of land, the frater stands on the north side of the cloister, whereas it was customary in England to place the church in this position.¹⁶

The only obvious explanation for this is that the north arm of the moat was already there to be used as a drain, although for some reason the abbey buildings were not perfectly aligned with it. This assumption is strengthened by the distribution of most of the desmesne lands, close to the Abbey but south of the village.

A more complete plan of the infirmary has been revealed by recent work, the most important features being the position of what was almost certainly the chapel and also the nature and exact position of the passage leading from the main range.

Finally the discovery of four burials in an area where a lead coffin had already been

found indicates that there was a cemetery to the south of the church.

Since Brakspear's paper in *Records of Bucks* was written, firstly Mr James Bissley and then from 1916 the sisters of The Society of the Precious Blood have made every effort within their financial resources to maintain the fabric and keep the character of the abbey.

Acknowledgements.

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