

St Benet's Abbey, Horning, Norfolk

Dr Richard Hoggett

Introduction

The earthwork and masonry remains of St Benet's abbey, which lies in the parish of Horning in the heart of the Norfolk Broads, stand on a small island – or holme – of sand and gravel in the surrounding marshes (TG 383 156). The site is bounded to the south by the River Bure, and a water-filled ditch which is fed by the river defines the northern circuit of the precinct. The site was originally approached from the north-west via an earthwork causeway, the remains of which can still be traced, and this entered the precinct via the western gatehouse ([Plate 1](#)).

Norfolk's first Benedictine house, St Benet's abbey was formally endowed by Cnut c.1020 and by the time of the Domesday survey the abbey had already acquired interests in a great many parishes in north-east Norfolk. Although the first secure documentary references are to the eleventh century, later chronicles suggest that the abbey's origins perhaps lay with hermits who occupied the site as early as the ninth century, an assertion which the archaeological evidence seems to support.

Construction of the monastic buildings began in earnest in the early eleventh century, and continued unabated under a succession of abbots for the next few centuries. The abbey received a licence to crenellate in 1327, and several sections of the precinct wall can be seen atop an earthwork bank that sits inside the precinct's encircling ditch. The major architectural element which survives on the site today is

the elaborate fourteenth-century gatehouse which stands at the western edge of the precinct ([Plate 2](#)). The remains of the abbey church itself are slight, primarily comprising the stub of the north wall of the nave and transept, while the southern wall is represented by tumbling rubble.

The influence of St Benet's was certainly felt throughout East Anglia: during the first half of the eleventh century a dependent Benedictine cell dedicated to SS Michael and Felix was founded at Rumburgh (Suffolk) and, according to some later sources, the monks of St Benet's were apparently instrumental in the foundation of the Benedictine abbey at Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk). The abbey also seems to have been a cult centre for a number of local saints, including the local martyr St Margaret of Holm. As a major landholder, the abbey was heavily involved in the management and exploitation of the local landscape, and especially the creation of the wide network of flooded peat-diggings which gave rise to the Broads for which the area is so well known.

St Benet's is unusual in that it survived the Dissolution, when in 1539 the abbey and its holdings were transferred to the Bishop of Norwich, and to this day the Bishop of Norwich still holds the title of Abbot of St Benet's. The ruins of the abbey church are still consecrated, and the Bishop holds an annual open-air service on the site on the first Sunday of August.

During the eighteenth century the brick tower of a windmill was constructed around the western half of the gatehouse, removing the gatehouse's second storey and creating a most unusual juxtaposition which has captured the interests of artists and photographers ever since.

The abbey site became a Scheduled Monument in 1915, one of the first in Norfolk, and is recorded in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record as [NHER 5199](#). The gatehouse is a Grade I listed building, while the remains of the church are Grade II* listed and the remains of the riverside buildings and precinct wall are Grade II listed. The site is open to the public and is currently owned and managed by the [Norfolk Archaeological Trust](#) (NAT), who bought most of the precinct in 2002 and acquired the gatehouse in 2004. The church ruins themselves are still owned by the diocese, but have been leased to the NAT for 199 years.

Key Events / Figures

The origins of St Benet's abbey are something of a mystery. Although the first secure documentary references date from the eleventh century, there is other archaeological and historical evidence to suggest that the site may first have been settled as early as the ninth century.

The most comprehensive account of the site's origins is that given in the anonymous mid-fourteenth-century chronicle incorrectly attributed to John Brompton and later incorporated into Dugdale's *Monasticon* (Twysden 1652, col. 721–1281; see also Pestell 2004, 142–6 and Licence 2006, 42–8). This chronicle records the tradition that the original occupant of the site was a hermit called Suneman who built a chapel to St Benedict c.AD 800 and gathered about him a number of other like-minded individuals who lived there for over 50 years, only for the site to be despoiled by the Danish incursions of the later ninth century. After a hiatus, one Wolfric is said to have reoccupied the site in the mid-tenth century along with a group of seven companions, rebuilding the church and dwelling there for

some 60 years before King Cnut took an interest in the foundation while staying at nearby Horning. In a move which is taken by many to mark the official foundation of the Benedictine abbey, Cnut bestowed the community with three of his local manors – Horning, Ludham and Neatishead – the transaction being recorded in a charter dating from 1020x22 ([S 984](#)).

While many disregard the reported earlier history of the site as spurious, elements of this story and supplemental details appear separately in three late thirteenth-century sources – the *Chronicle of John of Oxnead*, a ‘Lesser Chronicle’ and an ‘Early History’ of St Benet’s (Ellis 1859). The inclusion of these details – such as a mention of Suneman’s death in AD 870–1 – suggests that these later sources are all in part based on earlier, lost originals and indicate that there may be some substance to the Suneman and Wolfric story after all (Licence 2004; 2006). It would seem that, rather than marking the abbey’s foundation, Cnut’s bequest should be seen as the first major benefaction to a monastery which had been in existence since the mid-tenth century and which perhaps incorporated earlier ninth-century foundations.

Following Cnut’s royal patronage, many other prominent figures – including Edith Swan-neck, the wife of King Harold – made similar bequests to St Benet’s, greatly enhancing its holdings, the vast majority of which lay in north-east Norfolk. A measure of these acquisitions can be gained from a forged charter of 1046 in which Edward the Confessor purportedly confirmed the abbey’s holdings in 36 parishes ([S 1055](#)). Although the charter itself is thought to be spurious, the holdings seem to reflect the actuality, and the abbey’s holdings had expanded even further by the

time of the Domesday survey (Pestell 2004, fig. 24). These acquisitions continued after the conquest, but the role played by the abbot in resisting the Norman invasion seems to have restricted development under the Normans. By the time of the 1291 taxation the abbey had interests in 76 Norfolk parishes with a total value of £326 4s 3¼d, a sum which had risen to £583 17s 0¼d by the time of the *Valor* in 1535 (Page 1906).

The influence of St Benet's was certainly felt throughout eleventh-century East Anglia. A Benedictine cell dedicated to SS Michael and Felix was founded at Rumburgh (Suffolk) as a dependency of St Benet's by the East Anglian bishop Æthelmær (1047–70) and Thurstan, the second abbot of St Benet's who died in 1064. The priory was apparently populated by monks of Holme, led by one Blakere, but the abbey's control of the priory was short-lived and by the time of the Domesday survey in 1086 it was no longer a part of the abbey's holdings (Page 1975, 77–9; Pestell 2004, 124–6; 2008, 24–5).

According to some later sources, including the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, the monks of St Benet's were apparently also instrumental in the foundation of the Benedictine abbey at Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk) in the first half of the eleventh century, sending thirteen of its monks to Bury, presided over by Ufi, who subsequently became Abbot of Bury (Page 1906; Pestell 2004, 113–16; Licence 2006). The validity of these claims is much debated, but the houses of St Benet's and Bury certainly enjoyed a close relationship, so that when the abbey at Bury was attacked by the townsfolk in 1326–7 several of its monks sought refuge at St Benet's (Page 1906). St Benet's itself was attacked during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, when a number of its

tenants stormed the site in the belief that the Bishop of Norwich was to be found there. Not finding him, the mob instead burnt many of the abbey's court rolls outside the gates, so that no record would exist of their tenurial responsibilities, although the rolls were rewritten following the quashing of the uprising (Page 1906).

As a major landholder, the abbey was heavily involved in the management and exploitation of the local landscape, and especially the creation of the wide network of Broads for which the area is so well known. These Broads are the flooded remains of medieval peat-diggings – turbaries – the earliest references to which are contained in the registers of the abbey for the years 1141–9. Such diggings continued throughout the medieval period, dwindling in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as rising water levels flooded the workings (Lambert 1960, 73–6). Flooding was always a problem in such a low-lying area, and the abbey itself was inundated during the winter of 1287–8, when the buildings in the outer precinct could only be reached by boat and horses had to be stabled in the nave of the abbey church (Ellis 1859, 270–1; Page 1906).

St Benet's seems to have been a cult centre for a number of local saints, although few details of them have survived. There are tantalising suggestions in later historical documents that the Late Saxon founders of the site, Suneman and Wulfric, might have been venerated there (Licence 2004), while greater certainty surrounds the cult which arose around St Margaret of Holm – a martyr killed in the nearby parish of Hoveton St John and apparently buried under the abbey's high altar. Her cult seems to have arisen at St Benet's in the early fourteenth century, and may in part be responsible for the high number of Margaret dedications found in Norfolk

churches, including Hoveton itself (Luxford 2002; 2009). Our main account of Margaret comes from the writings of William Worcestre, who described the church, its monuments and its institutional history in the late fifteenth century (Harvey 1969; Luxford 2002, 111). Worcestre's works also record a notable late patron of the abbey, Sir John Falstof of Caister Castle, an English knight who paid for a south aisle to be added the choir and who was buried in a chapel to the north of the high altar in 1459.

Architecture / Cultural Life

One of the most interesting artefacts to have been discovered on the site is a [small sheet of lead bearing a runic inscription](#), which was found in a molehill in 2003 (Hines 2006). This sheet was pierced for attachment at one end and had been folded up, but enough of its surface can be seen for the identification of Scandinavian runes, although their text is nonsensical. The inscription may have been considered to have had amuletic properties and the abbey has a number of documented Danish connections during the eleventh century which may explain its presence on the site. The location of the findspot, near to the high altar of the abbey church, is suggestive of the charm having been buried with one of the members of the abbey community or a notable benefactor (Pestell 2008, 26).

The abbey's architectural history begins with a reference contained in the *Chronicle of John of Oxnead* which refers to the rebuilding in stone of the original 'mud' church (*ecclesia lutea*: presumably wattle and daub) during the reign of Cnut (Ellis 1859, 292), a statement which has implications for our understanding of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical architecture in the region, which seems to have been largely of

timber even at this late date. Following the transition to stone, the piecemeal development (and redevelopment) of the monastic complex under a succession of abbots is detailed in the abbey's 'Early History' (Ellis 1859, 291–300). Of particular note are the construction of a western bell-tower with two bells during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the building of a new chapterhouse and dorter in the mid-twelfth century, the rebuilding of frater and cloister in the late twelfth century, and the leading of all of the abbey roofs in the late twelfth/early thirteenth centuries. The bakehouse was rebuilt in the mid-thirteenth century, and the foundation stone of a new presbytery laid in 1258; it was eventually completed in 1274 (Page 1906).

The abbey received a licence to crenellate in 1327, and several sections of the flint-faced precinct wall still survive atop an earthwork bank that sits inside the precinct's encircling ditch. However, the vast majority of the monastic buildings on the site now survive only as earthworks. The remains of the abbey church itself are slight, primarily comprising the stub of the north wall of the nave and transept, while the southern wall is represented by tumbling rubble (Plate 3). The church had a narrow nave and choir, certainly a north transept and presumably a matching south transept. An early manuscript illustration which was incorporated as an engraving into an eighteenth-century edition of Dugdale's *Monasticon* shows the abbey church from the north with an aisleless nave, a side chapel on the north wall of the choir and a circular or polygonal central crossing tower clad in lead sheeting, the latter being reminiscence of the lantern at Ely cathedral (Dugdale 1718, 37) (Plate 4).

The major architectural element which survives on the site today is the elaborate fourteenth-century gatehouse which stands at the western edge of the precinct (Plate 2). Although now surmounted by the brick tower of an eighteenth-century windmill, the construction of which required the removal of the gatehouse's second storey, antiquarian illustrations show the gatehouse as a grand, vaulted structure of stone and brick with elaborate windows on the upper storey. The exterior featured panels of flint flushwork decoration, niches and rows of carved shields bearing the heraldic devices of significant benefactors, several of which can still be seen (Pevsner and Wilson 2002, 561–2; Pestell 2008, 7–12).

Although the abbey buildings are now ruinous, the isolated nature of the site and its Broadland setting have meant that it has remained largely undisturbed since it was abandoned and, consequently, elements of the precinct survive as a series of spectacular earthworks (Plate 1). There have never been any archaeological excavations on the site, but several episodes of non-intrusive fieldwork have been undertaken. A detailed survey of the surviving earthworks was conducted by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in 1994 (RCHME 1994; Cushion and Davison 2003, 148–51). Earthwork traces of the claustral buildings can be made out surrounding the remains of the abbey church, while the earthwork boundaries of an inner court surrounding the main building complex and separating it from the outer precinct can also be clearly seen on the ground. A geophysical resistance survey of several areas of the precinct was conducted by English Heritage in 1996, although the underlying ground conditions meant that the results of this survey were at best inconclusive (Linford 1996). The survey did, however, reveal

areas of masonry surviving beneath the ground to the south of the abbey church, likely to be the remains of the cloisters.

Between the inner court and the precinct boundary wall lie a series of large rectangular enclosures which are likely to have contained structures relevant to the day-to-day running of the abbey, such as the bakehouse, brewhouse, stables, workshops, gardens, and so on. Air photo interpretation undertaken as a part of the Norfolk National Mapping Programme revealed two ranges of previously unrecorded buildings visible as parchmarks between the south of the abbey church and the river (Albone *et al.* 2007, 20–1). One of the building ranges was likely to have formed part of the domestic or ancillary buildings of the abbey, while the other may have been outbuildings and stables associated with the later Chequers Inn which stood on the riverside.

One of the most notable survivals on the site is the earthworks of a series of geometrically arranged fishponds which are to be found inside the western end of the precinct (Plate 1). Fishponds were an important part of many monastic precincts, and those at St Benet's are of a particularly large and elaborate design featuring two pairs of rectangular ponds flanking a larger central pond, in turn surrounded by several smaller parallel channels (RCHME 2004; Cushion and Davison 2003, 148–51). There are parallels between these ponds and other ornamental ponds and lakes found at other sites, such as Clare Castle (Suffolk), and it is likely that these ponds were as much a statement of status and prestige as they were functional *vivaria*.

Dissolution to Today

St Benet's is unusual in that it survived the Dissolution and to this day the Bishop of Norwich still holds the title of Abbot of St Benet's. The ruins of the abbey church are still consecrated, and the Bishop holds an annual open-air service on the site on the first Sunday of August. This curious situation arose following the appointment of William Rugge as abbot in 1530. Despite his initial defiance in the face of dissolution, Rugge's position weakened as the decade progressed and the King appointed him Bishop of Norwich in 1536. As a part of this process, an Act of Parliament was passed via which all of the existing lands of the bishopric were transferred to the Crown, and the St Benet's and its holdings transferred to the bishop, who also retained the abbacy of St Benet's (Page 1906; Pestell 2008, 37–40).

The Act required the bishop to retain a prior and twelve monks, but despite this all of the monks had left by 1545 and Rugge and his successors set about stripping the assets of the site. Much of the building stone was removed, some of it being reused in the construction of the new Duke of Norfolk's palace in Norwich, and it seems likely that a spectacular length of oak panelling depicting figures from Biblical and classical mythology was relocated to the Bishop's Palace in Norwich at this time (Hedge 2013).

By the late sixteenth century, most of the abbey building were in ruins, with the exception of the gatehouse, a barn and one of the riverside buildings – purportedly the former Abbot's House – which was being occupied by a fisherman by the name of Edmund Dye. By the nineteenth century this house had become a pub – the Chequers Inn – which was a very popular destination with passing shipping

on the Broads. The Chequers had become a private dwelling by the 1880s and burnt down in 1891. The building had been demolished by 1907, but late nineteenth-century photographs and pencil sketches capture something of the late medieval character of the building (Pestell 2008, 40–1).

During the eighteenth century the brick tower of a windmill was constructed around the western half of the gatehouse (Page and Yardy 2011, 63). This mill was reputedly built to crush seeds for oil, although it also seems to have been used to help drain the surrounding land. The mill continued to be used until it was damaged by a gale in 1863. The most unusual juxtaposition of mill and gatehouse has become an iconic Norfolk image, one which has captured the interest of artists, such as John Chrome, James Stark and John Sell Cotman of the Norwich School, ever since.

References

- Albone, J. and Massey, S. with Tremlett, S. 2007. *The Archaeology of Norfolk's Broads Zone*. Unpublished English Heritage Report. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/archaeology-norfolks-broads-zone-nmp/>
- Cushion, B. and Davison, A. 2003. *The Earthworks of Norfolk*. East Anglian Archaeology 104.
- Dugdale, W. 1718. *Monasticon Anglicanum*. London.
- Ellis, H. (ed.) 1859. *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*. London. <http://archive.org/details/chronicajohannis00joha>
- Harvey, J.H. 1969. (ed. and trans.) *William Worcestre: Itineraries*. Oxford.
- Hedge, S. 2013. 'Virtue and Vice in the Vestry: Sixteenth-Century Wall Panelling in Norwich Cathedral', *Norfolk Archaeology* 46(3), 311–30.
- Hines, J. 2006. 'An Inscribed Lead Plaque from Holm St Benets, Norfolk', *Nytt om Runer* 19, 14–15. http://www.arild-hauge.com/Nytt_om_Runer/NoR19.pdf
- Lambert, J.M., Jennings, J.N., Smith, C.T., Green, C. and Hutchinson, J.N. 1960. *The Making of the Broads: A Reconsideration of their Origin in the Light of New Evidence*. London.
- Licence, T. 2004. 'Suneman and Wulfric: Two Forgotten Saints of St Benedict's Abbey at Holme in Norfolk', *Analecta Bollandiana* 122, 361–72.

Licence, T. 2006. 'The Origins of the Monastic Communities of St Benedict at Holme and Bury St Edmunds', *Revue Bénédictine* 116, 43–61.

Linford, P. 1996. *The Abbey of St Benet at Holm, Horning, Norfolk. Report on Geophysical Survey, August 1996*. Unpublished Ancient Monuments Laboratory Report 71/96: <http://www.eng-h.gov.uk/reports/stbenets/>

Luxford, J. 2002. 'St Margaret of Holm: new Evidence Concerning a Norfolk Benedictine Cult', *Norfolk Archaeology* 44(1), 111–19.

Luxford, J. 2009. 'A Further Reference to St Margaret of Holm', *Norfolk Archaeology* 45(3), 416–18.

Page, M. and Yardy, A. 2011. *A–Z Norfolk Mills*. Wellington.

Page, W. (ed.). 1906. 'Houses of Benedictine monks: The abbey of St Benet of Holm' in *A History of the County of Norfolk: Volume 2*. pp.330–6. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38263>

Page, W. (ed.) 1975. 'Houses of Benedictine monks: Priory of Rumburgh' in *A History of the County of Suffolk: Volume 2*. pp.77–9. British History Online. Web. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=37885>

Pestell, T. 2004. *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation*. Boydell.

Pestell, T. 2008. *St Benet's Abbey: A Guide and History*. Norfolk Archaeological Trust.

RCHME. 1994. *The Abbey of St Benet at Holm, Horning, Norfolk*. Unpublished RCHME report.

Pevsner, N. and Wilson, B. 2002. *The Buildings of England: Norfolk 1: Norwich and North-East*. Yale.

Twysden, R. (ed.) 'Chronicon Joannis Brompton' in *Historiae anglicanae scriptores X*. London. cols 721–1281. <http://archive.org/details/historiaeanglica01sime>

Captions

Plate 1. An aerial view of St Benet's from the west (© Norfolk County Council. Taken by Derek A. Edwards on 8 April 1997: TG3815/ABD/HPK12).

Plate 2. The abbey gatehouse and later mind-pump tower viewed from the north-east.

Plate 3. An aerial view of the ruins of the abbey church from the south (© Norfolk County Council. Taken by Derek A. Edwards on 6 July 1994: TG3815/AU/HZS4).

Plate 4. An engraving of the abbey church based on an earlier manuscript illustration (Dugdale 1718).



Plate 1. An aerial view of St Benet's from the west (© Norfolk County Council. Taken by Derek A. Edwards on 8 April 1997: TG3815/ABD/HPK12).



Plate 2. The abbey gatehouse and later mind-pump tower viewed from the north-east.

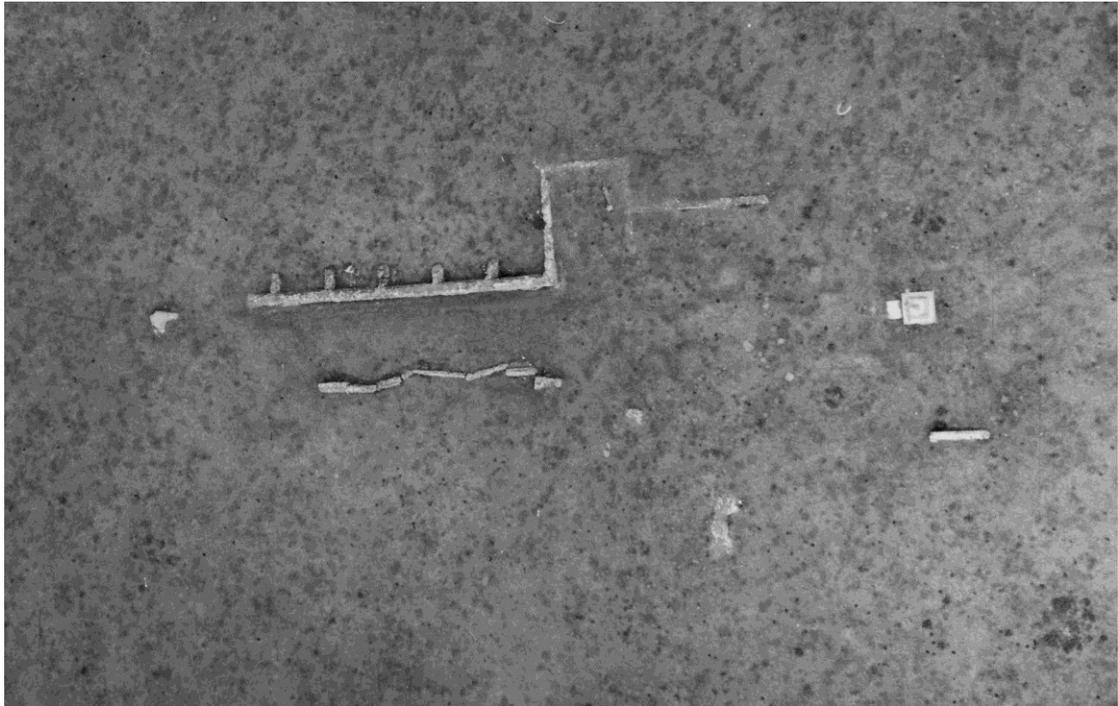


Plate 3. An aerial view of the ruins of the abbey church from the south (© Norfolk County Council. Taken by Derek A. Edwards on 6 July 1994: TG3815/AU/HZS4).

Ecclesiæ Cœnobialis S. Benedicti
de Hulmo in Agro Norfolciensi, cœnobio
nondum everso delineatæ, et in quodam
codice M.S. in Bibliotheca Cottoniana
reperatæ, Figura.

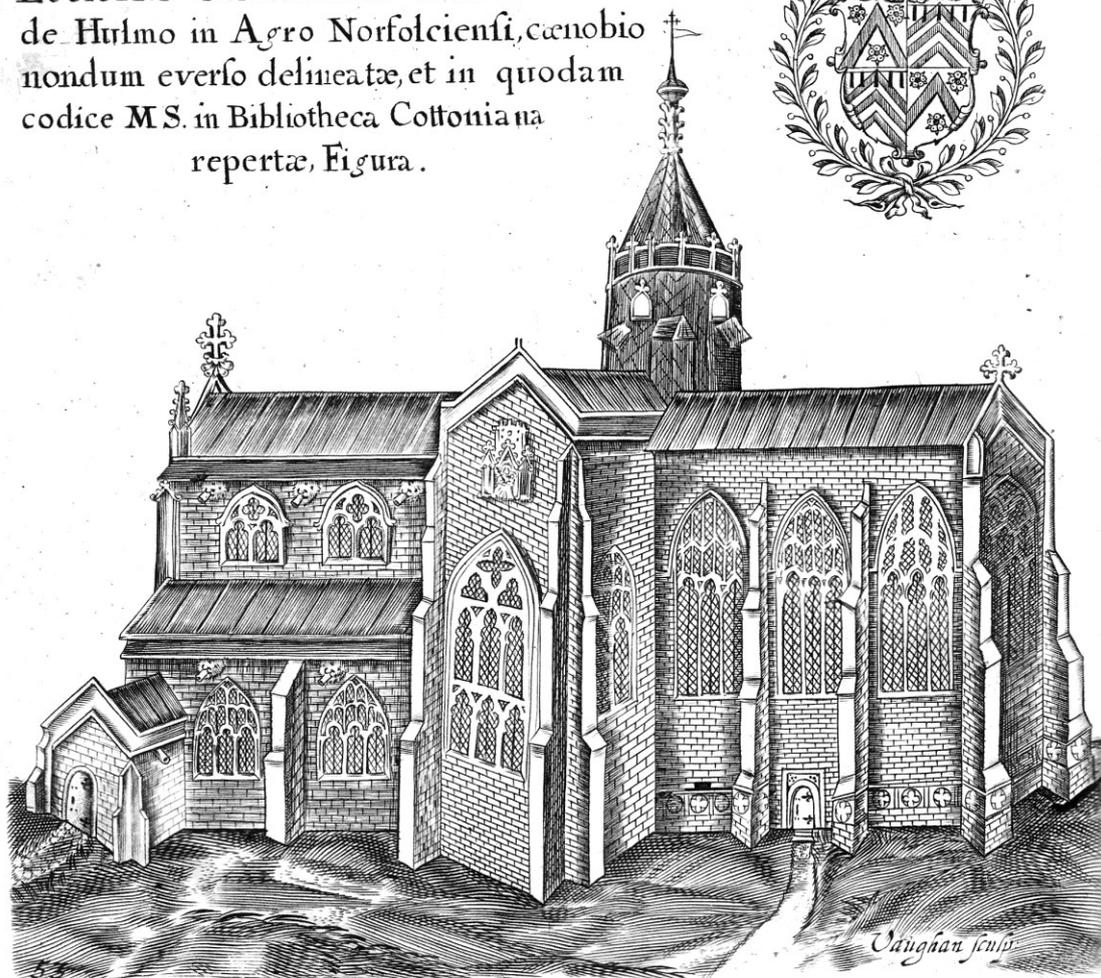


Plate 4. An engraving of the abbey church based on an earlier manuscript illustration
(Dugdale 1718).