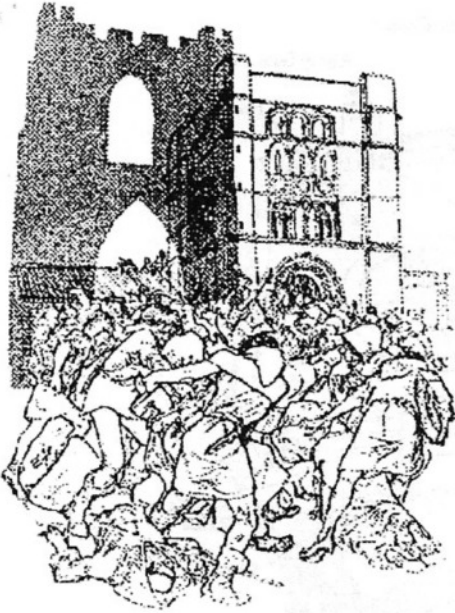


The Abbey of St Edmund Trail – November 2014

1 The Abbey Gate



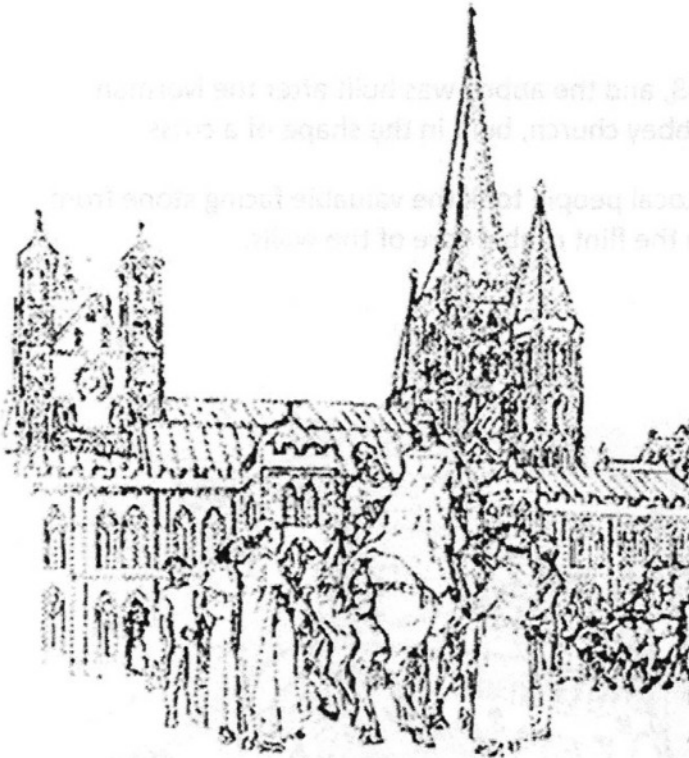
This is the entrance to the Great Court. The original gate was probably in line with Abbey Gate Street outside, but was damaged in 1327 when protesting townsfolk plundered the abbey and kidnapped the abbot. A new gate was built in the mid 14th century alongside the site of the old one.

Today, the Abbey Gate, together with the Norman Tower, are the only surviving buildings which give some impression of the Abbey of St Edmund at its peak.

The illustration shows both gates, the existing Abbey Gate in outline only.

Its beautiful decoration hides its defensive nature. It has battlements, a portcullis, no windows on its outer face, and hidden in the niches are arrow slits.

2 The Great Court



You are now in the Great Court, a large area surrounded by buildings, where the practical affairs of the busy abbey were conducted.

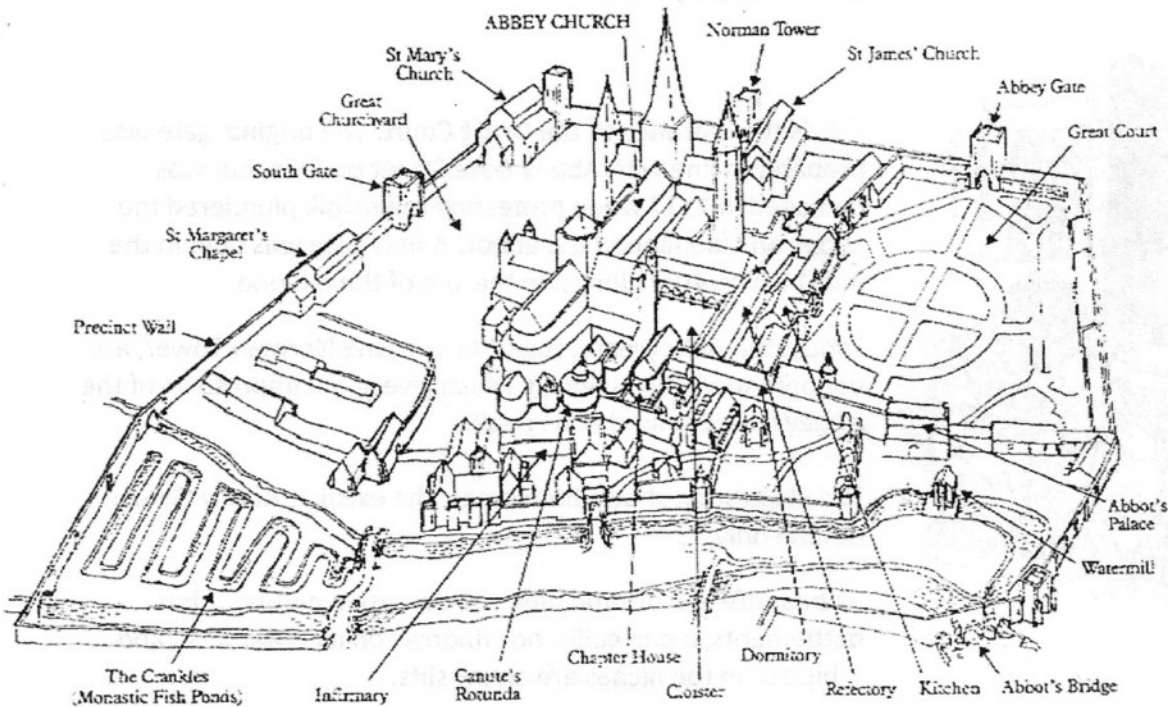
Round this were the kitchen, larder, brewery, bakery, mill, granary, cowshed, guesthouse and stables. There would also have been workshops for blacksmiths, masons and carpenters.

The Court House, or Hall of Pleas, was also here where the abbot administered royal justice. Vital charity for the poor was distributed from the almonry.

As the abbey owned much property, many of the monks had to perform administrative tasks. At the height of its power, the abbey had nearly 30 official offices of which the most important were the prior, the cellarer and the sacrist.

3 The model of the Abbey

This model shows the abbey as it might have been in about 1200s shortly after the completion of the towers over the west front.



The ruins are part of the once magnificent Abbey of St Edmund, one of the most powerful Benedictine monasteries in medieval England.

A religious community was founded here in about 633, and the abbey was built after the Norman Conquest. Dominating the other buildings was the abbey church, built in the shape of a cross.

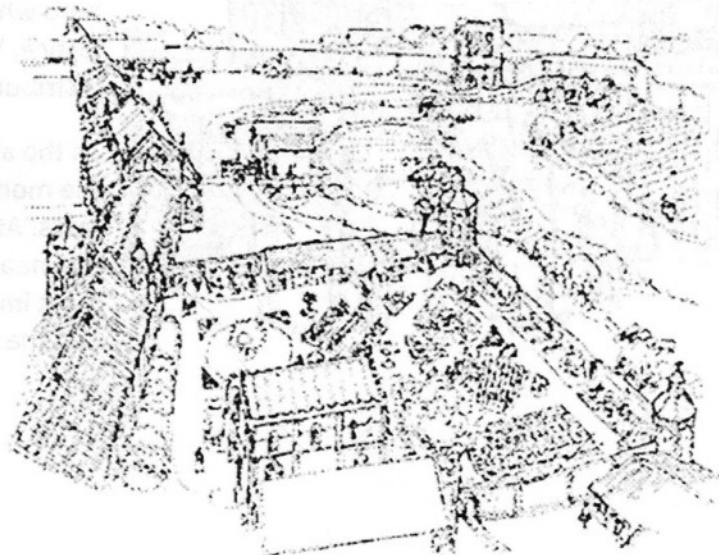
The abbey was dissolved by King Henry VIII in 1539. Local people took the valuable facing stone from the buildings to use in their own houses, leaving only the flint rubble core of the walls.

4 The Abbott's Garden

The garden was attached to the Abbott's place, now completely demolished. The Abbott lived separately from the other monks and had his own manors to finance his life-style. He had power over the Liberty of St Edmund which covered all of West Suffolk.

He often travelled to visit his far flung estates, other abbeys, London or even the Vatican in Rome. When at home he was required to entertain noblemen, bishops and even the king.

In front of you is a dovecote and beyond

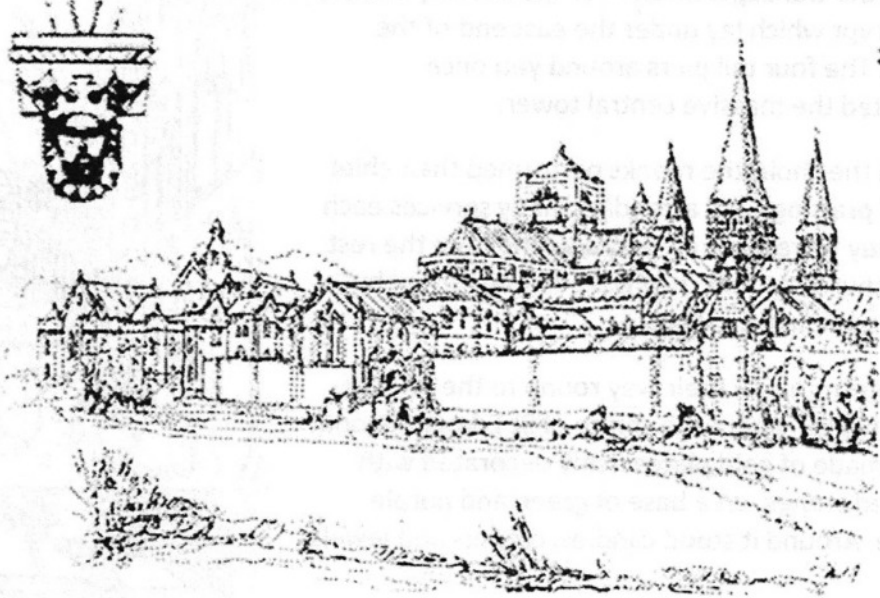


that the 13th century Abbott's Bridge and a long precinct wall which enclosed the whole site. The wall even extended over the river where the bridge and portcullis prevented boats entering the abbey.

5 A Town in itself

You are the edge of the monastic building, looking back towards the church. The illustration shows a view from across the river behind you.

A variety of buildings lie between here and the church. Nearest is the reredorter or monastic lavatory, joined to the dormitory. Beyond is the house where the prior, the Abbott's deputy, lived and the infirmary where sick monks were nursed. Near the church were the treasury and the warming house.



From a distance, the clustered buildings looked like a town, as the 16th century antiquarian John Leland reported:

'The sun does not shine on an abbey more famous, whether we regard its endowments, its size or its magnificence.

You would aver that the abbey was a town in itself, so many gates has it got... so many towers, and a church surpassed by none.'

6 The Pilgrims' Route



You are standing in the nave, the main body of one of the largest churches in Europe, facing the high altar and beyond this, the shrine of St Edmund.

In 869 Edmund, King of the East Angles, was killed by invading Danes who fired arrows into him and cut off his head. He was brought here for burial and Bury St Edmunds takes its name from him.

His relics made the abbey an important centre for pilgrims who came from long distances to his shrine. They did this as penance for their sins and to earn salvation for their souls.

Here pilgrims entered the church. Many would not have been in such a splendid building before.

With stone screens blocking their view of the monks' choir and high altar, they would press forward to get a glimpse of the shrine.

7 The Crossing and the Shrine

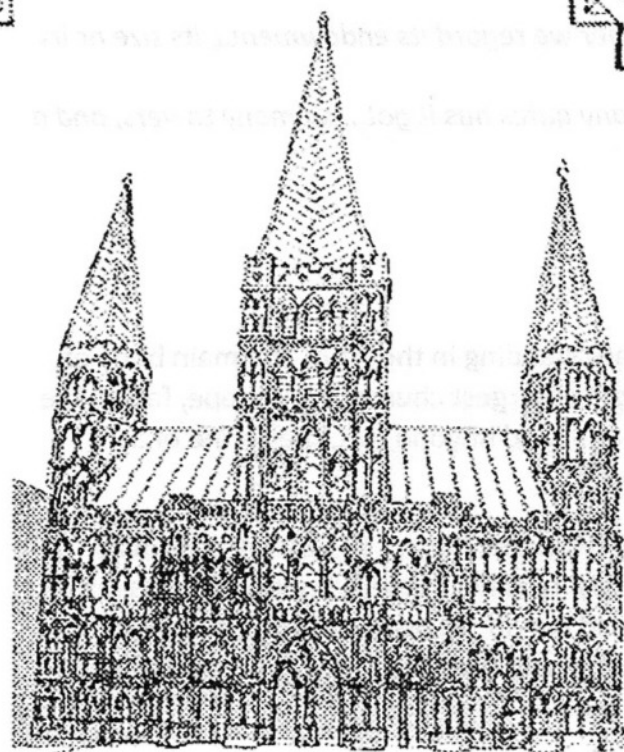
This was the heart of the church. On either side stretch the transepts or arms of the church; in front is the crypt which lay under the east end of the church. The four tall piers around you once supported the massive central tower.

Here in the choir, the monks performed their chief duty of praising God, attending many services each day. They were separated by screens from the rest of the church so that they were not disturbed by pilgrims passing through.

The pilgrims made their way round to the back of the high altar where the shrine of St Edmund stood. It was made of gold plates richly decorated with coloured stones, on a base of green and purple marble. Around it stood candles, crosses and jewels.



8 The Abbey Church of St Edmund



In front of you was once the magnificent west front of the abbey church of St Edmund. It had a central tower with an octagonal tower at each end. The one on the right, Abbot Samsons' Tower once was the Abbey Visitor Centre.

The curious building that you see today contains the remains of three great arches, whose outlines can still be seen. Houses have been built into the ruins.

Next to you is the 12th-century Norman Tower, which was one of the main entrances into the monastery. It is a similar age as the abbey and gives some idea of how the abbey church might have appeared.

The churchyard, the ruined chapel and the two churches were also part of the abbey. From here can be seen a modern statue by Elizabeth Frink of St Edmund, the king and martyr, who

has been remembered on this site for over a thousand years.