

+ ABBEY OF ST EDMUND +

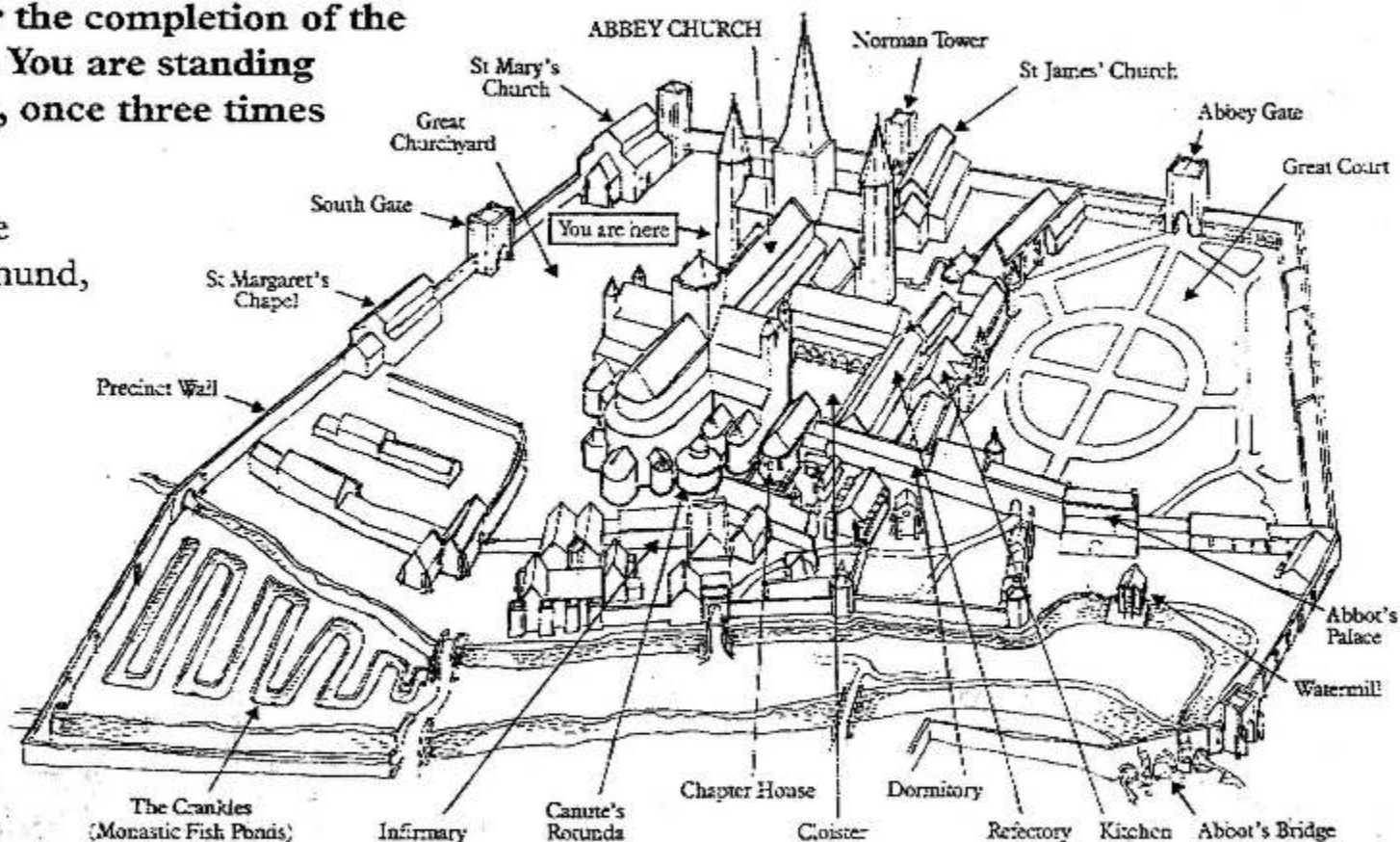
This model shows the abbey as it might have been in about 1200, shortly after the completion of the towers over the west front. You are standing behind one of these towers, once three times as high as it is now.

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.



Tape-Tour Station 1

This is the 1st of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre. Please take the path to your right to the next panel.

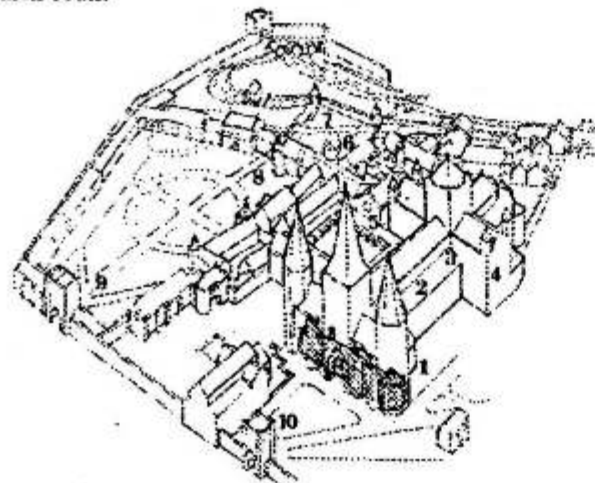
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THE PILGRIMS' ROUTE

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.

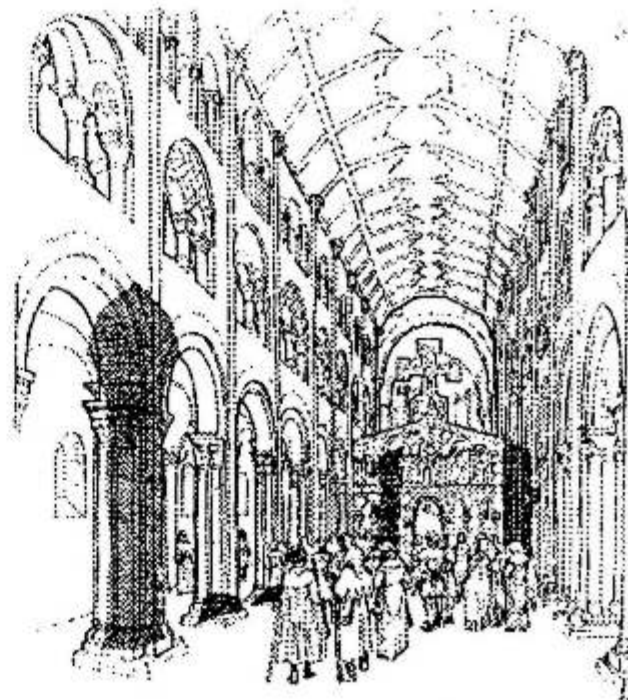
In 869 Edmund, King of the East Angles, was killed by invading Danes who fired arrows into him and cut off his head. He was brought here for burial and Bury St Edmunds takes its name from him.

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.



Panel 2

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.



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.

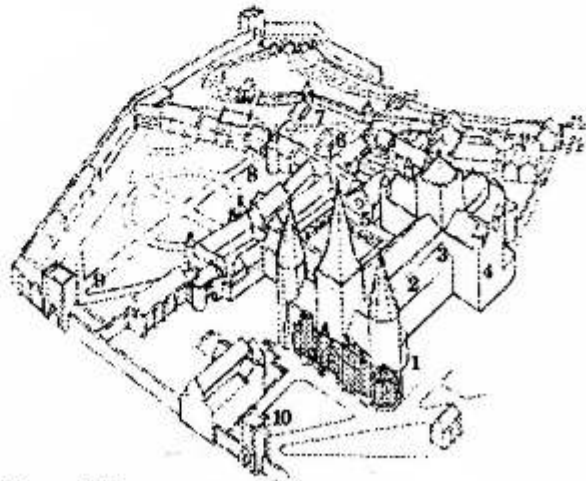
Please continue forward along the nave to the next panel.

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THE CROSSING AND THE SHRINE

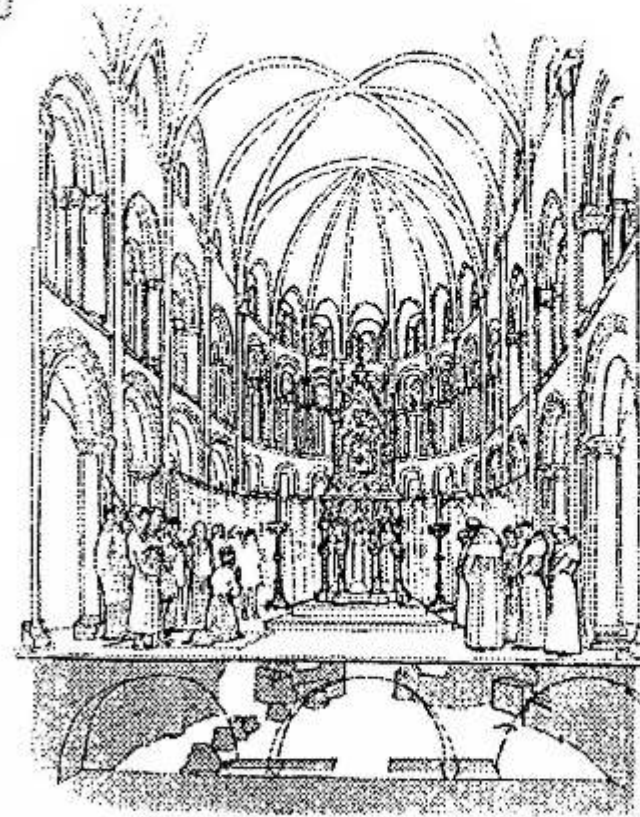
This was the heart of the church. On either side stretch the transepts or arms of the church; in front is the crypt which lay under the east end of the church. The four tall piers around you once supported the massive central tower.

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.



Panel 3

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.



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.

The next panel is to your right.

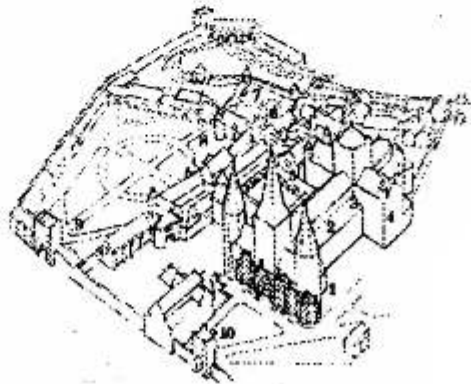
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THE SOUTH TRANSEPT AND SIDE CHAPELS

You are in one transept or arm of the cross-shaped church, looking towards the other transept where the outline of a window survives.

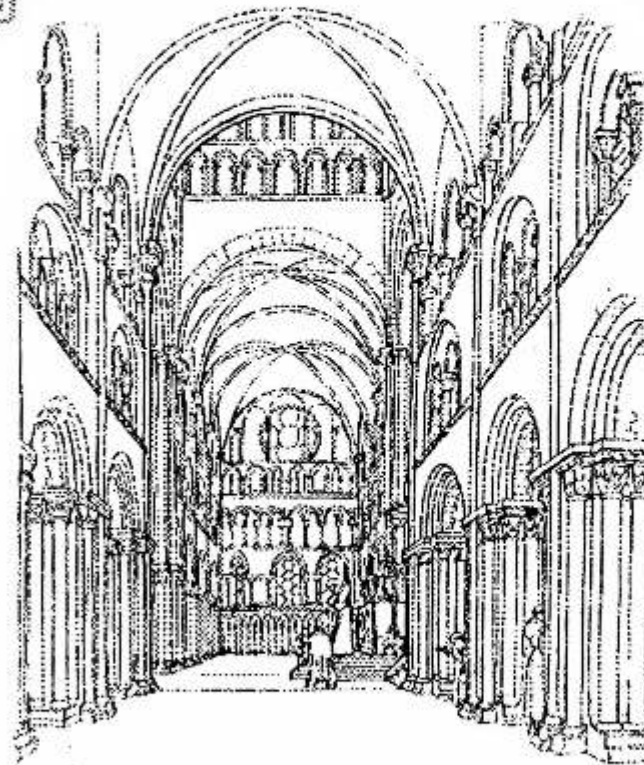
From here you can see the layout of the church. Although the Norman church was completed by about 1200, building operations continued throughout the medieval period, often to repair damage caused by gales, fire or riots.

To the right were aisles and semi-circular chapels. On the far transept, a Lady Chapel was added in 1275, replacing a rotunda built by King Canute in 1020.



Panel 4

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.



Many kings worshipped at St Edmund's shrine, including Henry II, Richard I and Henry VI, who used the south door entrance behind you. In 1214 it is said that a group of barons swore on the high altar to make King John accept the Magna Carta.

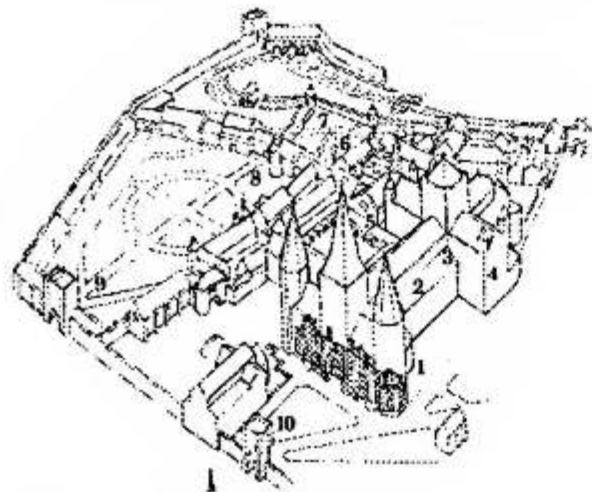
Please walk back past panel 3 and continue to the next panel to the left of the wall in front of you.

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THE CHAPTER HOUSE

This is one corner of the cloister, and to your right is the chapter house, the meeting room of the monks.

The cloister was a courtyard surrounded by a covered walkway, where the monks spent much of their time between services, in meditation and study. It linked the most important buildings of the abbey, including the church, the dining hall, the dormitory and the chapter house.

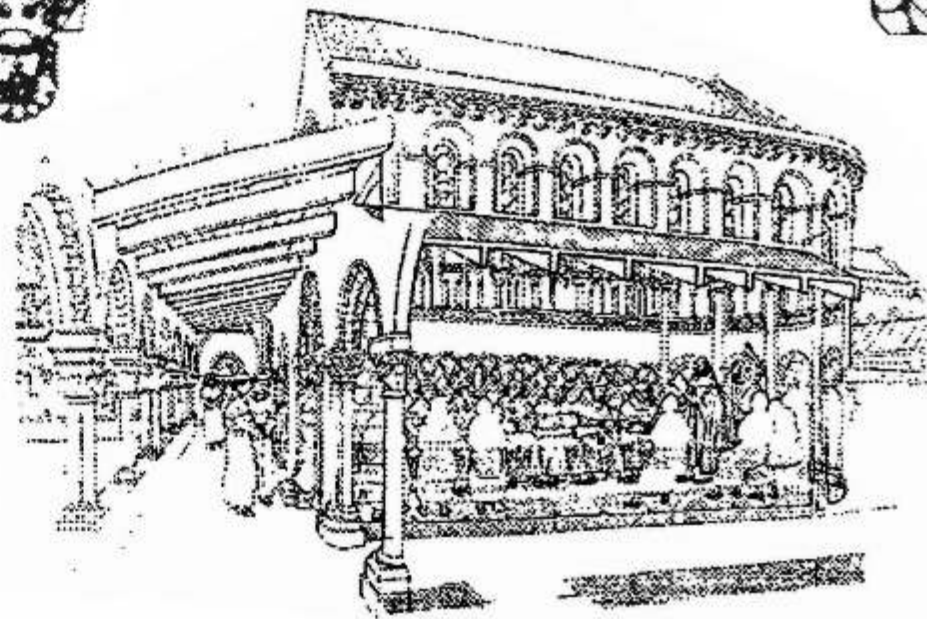


Panel 5

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.

It was called the chapter house because each morning a chapter was read from the Rule of St Benedict, which laid down the routine followed by all Benedictine abbeys.

Here the monks debated monastic business, made their confessions and were given punishments.



The monks sat on a stone bench around the room, parts of which still survive. In the centre are the graves of five abbots, including Abbot Samson.

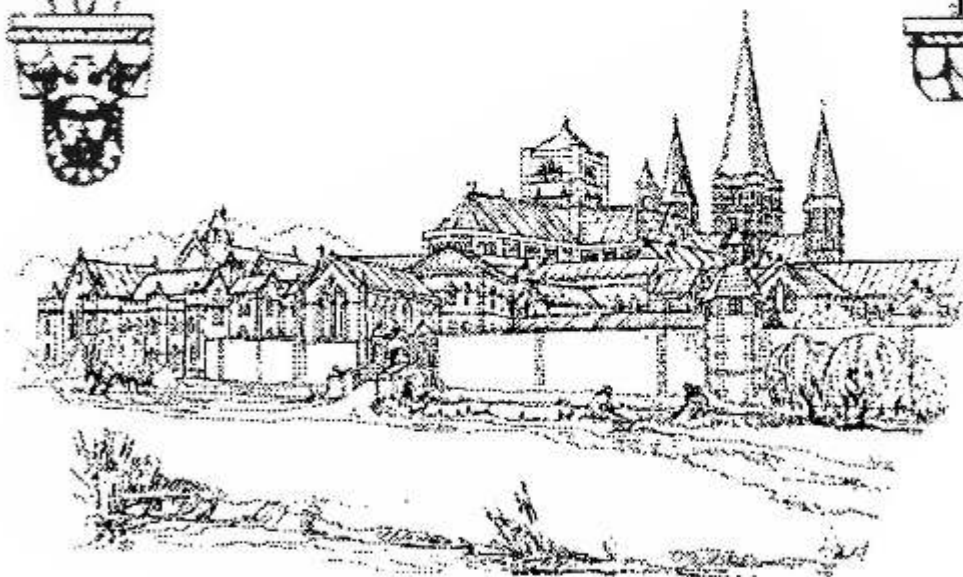
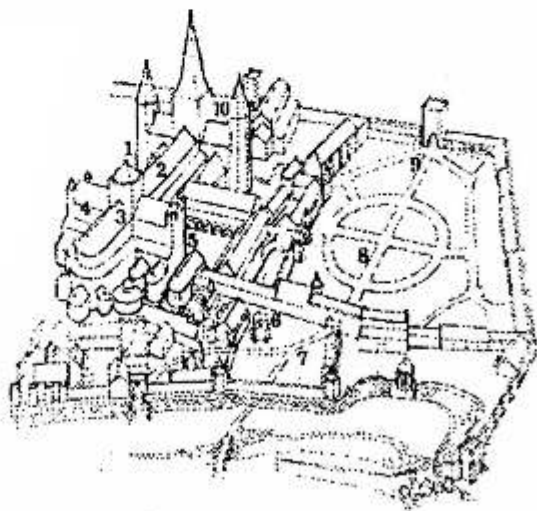
Now turn right alongside the chapter house remains and left when you are past these, towards the next panel.

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'A TOWN IN ITSELF'

You are at the edge of the monastic buildings, 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 abbot'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.'

Panel 6

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.

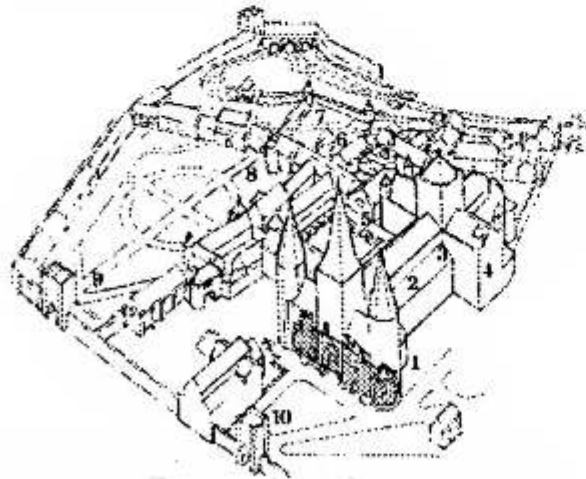
The next panel is behind you alongside the main path.

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THE ABBOT'S GARDEN

The garden was attached to the abbot's palace, now completely demolished. The abbot 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.

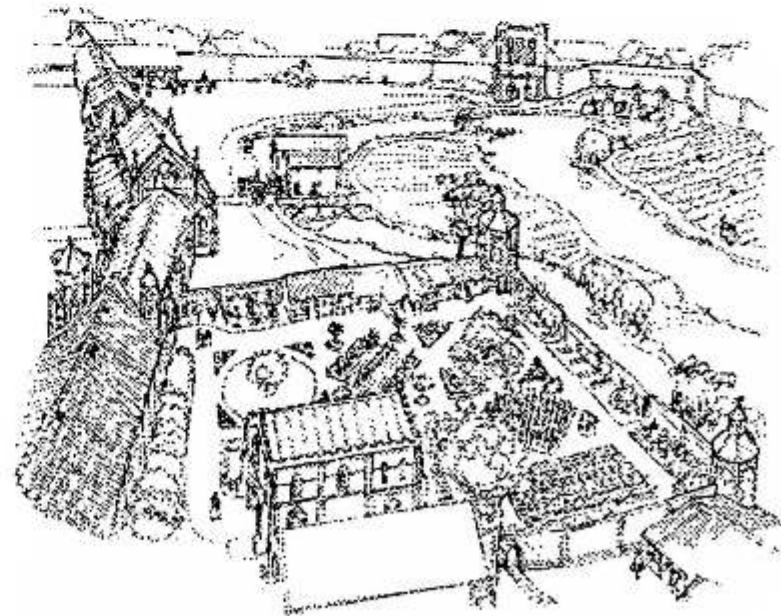
He often travelled to visit his far-flung estates, other abbeys, London or even the Vatican in Rome. At home he was required to entertain nobleman, bishops and even the king.



Panel 7

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.

In front of you is a dovecote and beyond that the 13th-century Abbot's Bridge and a long precinct wall which enclosed the whole site. The wall even extended over the river where the bridge and portcullises prevented boats entering the abbey.



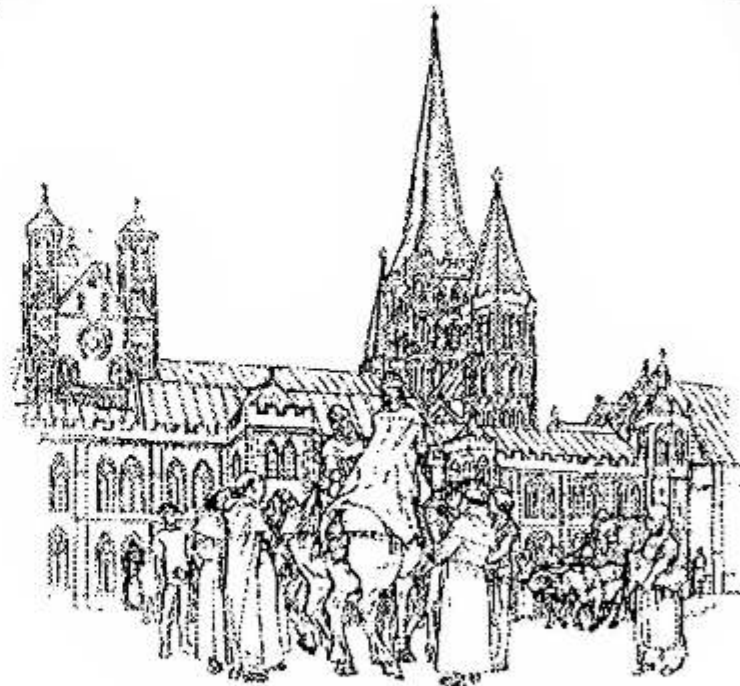
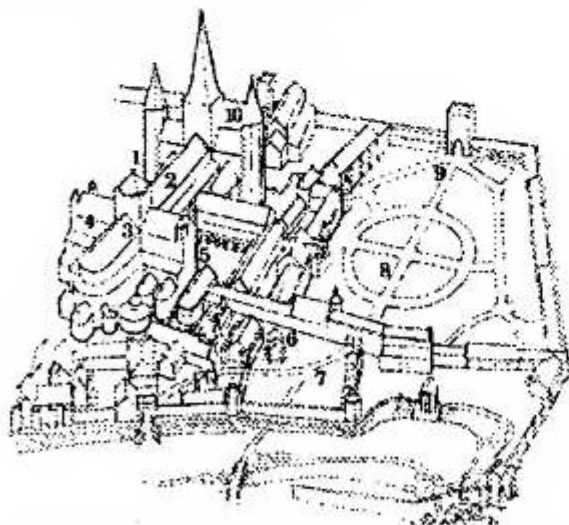
Continue to your left along the main path to the next panel.

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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.

Panel 8

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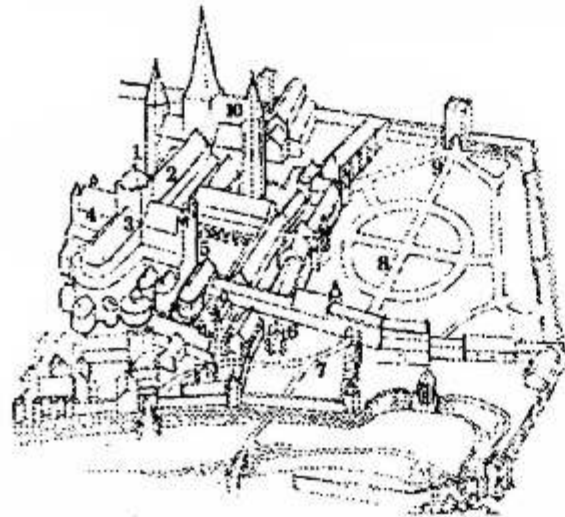
Continue along the path to the next panel at the Abbey Gate.

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THE ABBNEY GATE

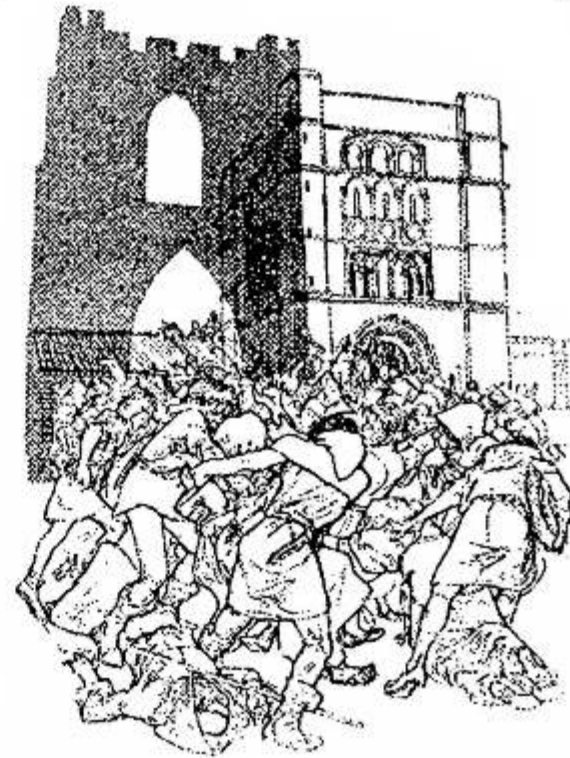
This is the entrance to the Great Court. The original gate was probably in line with Abbey Gate Street outside, but was damaged in 1327 when protesting townsfolk plundered the abbey and kidnapped the abbot. A new gate was built in the mid 14th century alongside the site of the old one.

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.



Panel 9

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.



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.

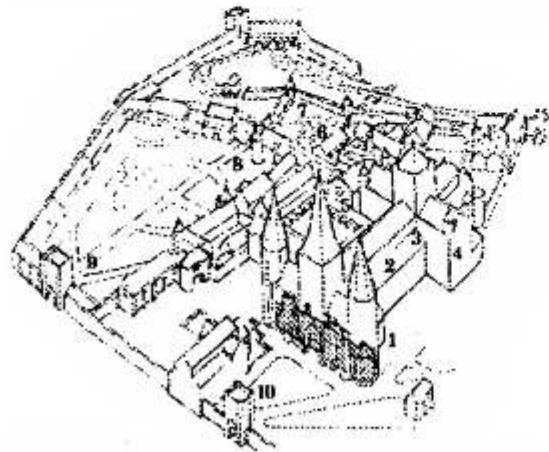
Please take the path to the left of the abbey gate and follow this until you reach the West Front and final panel.

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THE ABBEY CHURCH OF ST EDMUND

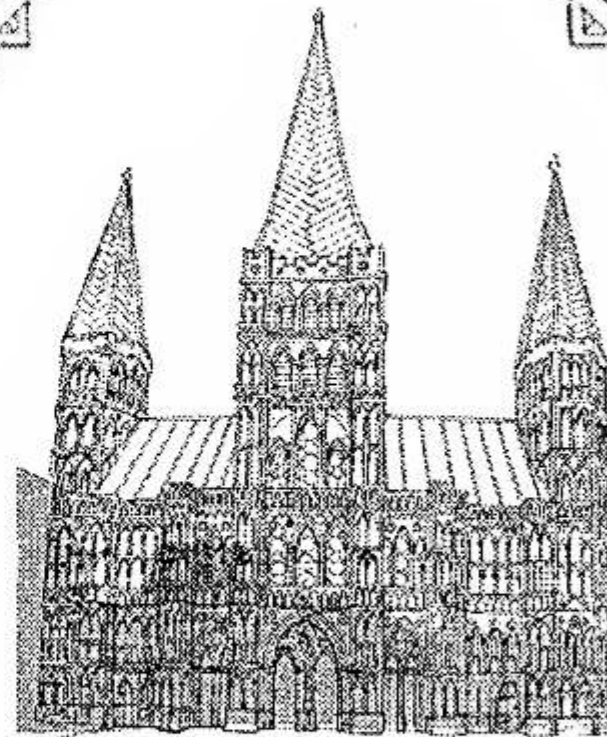
In front of you was once the magnificent west front of the abbey church of St Edmund. It had a central tower with an octagonal tower at each end. The one on the right, Abbot Samsons' Tower is now the Abbey Visitor Centre.

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.



Panel 10

This is one of 10 outdoor panels linked to a tape-tour available from the Abbey Visitor Centre.



Abbey Visitor Centre

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.