

THE PRIORY OF ST NICHOLAS GREAT YARMOUTH

Bishop Herbert de Losinga (1094-1119) founded the church of St Nicholas and with it a small Benedictine cell under the control of the Herbert's major monastic foundation at the cathedral in Norwich. The community served the parish church which was performed by three chaplains and a deacon appointed by the prior. The only surviving part of the priory is the so-called great hall which, on the stylistic evidence of the tracery and the magnificent arcaded screen, is of the mid 14th century. The account rolls at Norwich Cathedral have an entry for the priory in the year 1355-6 where the very large receipt of £212 - 2 - 5 is entered but this is exceeded by expenses of £235 - 5. These may well have been for rebuilding the hall.

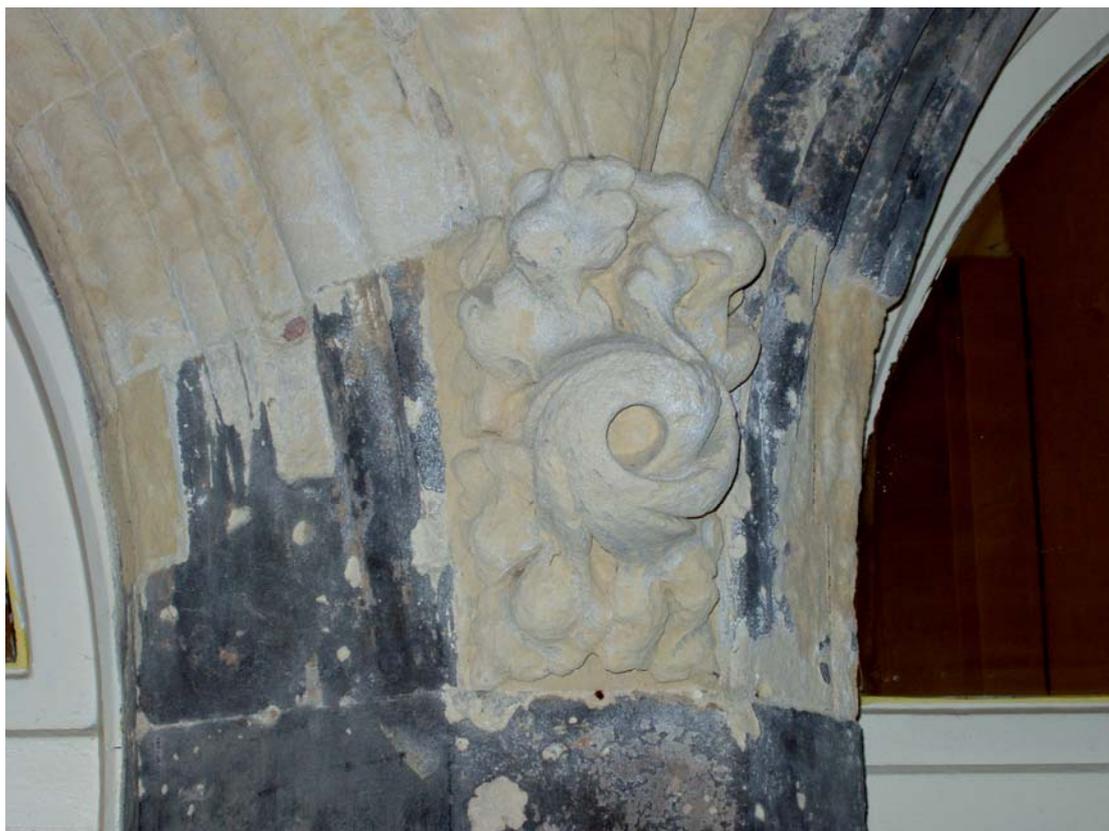
At the dissolution the priory remained the property of Norwich Cathedral under the new designation of Dean and Chapter. In 1551 they leased the priory and the parsonage to Robert Sowel for 80 years. The prior's lodgings were demolished at the time of the civil war and the cloisters were used for storing powder and shot. The cloisters were demolished in 1811 and the hall had declined into a stable. During the 1840s the plight of the building was noticed and a great restoration took place and the school was founded in 1852.

The cloisters filled the space between the church and the great hall and as such the surviving hall should have been the frater or refectory of the priory, according to the standard layout. Faden's map of 1789 (attached) shows some surviving buildings in this part of the churchyard but it is difficult to see how they could have formed part of a cloister garth. One might expect that the large doorway leading into the churchyard entered directly into a walk with a large building to the west of it. There is no sign of abutment or provision for cloister walks against the north wall of the hall suggesting an abnormal layout with a freestanding cloister. Further research, especially into early maps, may reveal the answer.

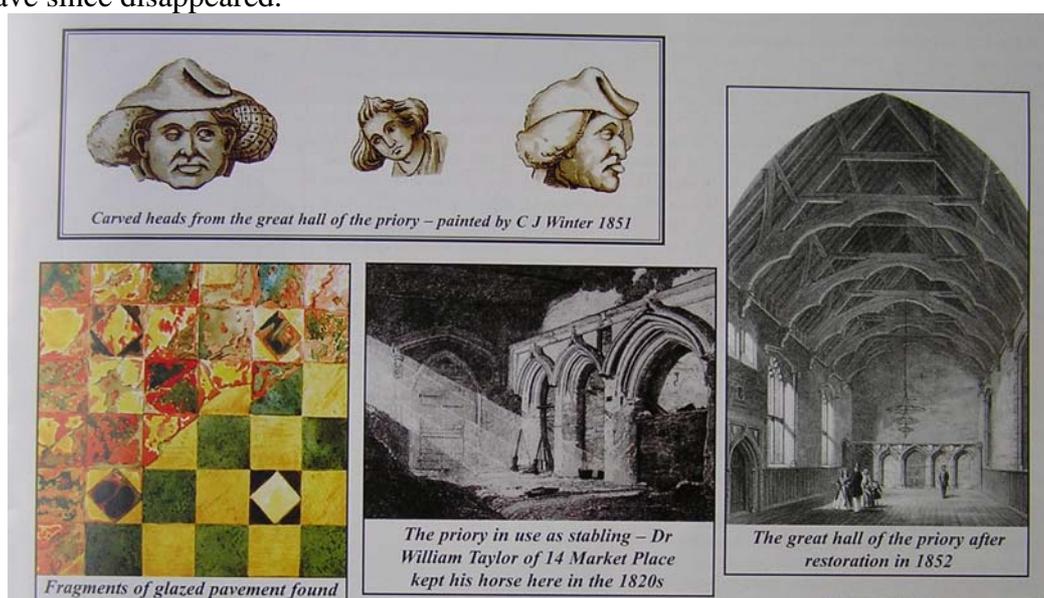
The attached engraving (after J S Cotman?) shows the state of the screen when the building served as a stable. Comparison is informative.



The engravings reveal that the elaborate label stops, as convincing as they may appear, are part of the Victorian restoration.



The priory screen is, despite the keen restoration, an extremely fine and rare survival. It consists of a five bay arcade of two-centred arches surmounted by ogee hoods with tiny hollowed-out trefoils at their heads. The centre bay is wider and presumably was the only way through the screen although it is not clear how the other arches were treated in their original forms. The ogee tops penetrate a moulded cornice and carved into the cornice are representations of ribbons looking as if shields hanged from them. Engravings show that the shields were reinstated at the restoration of the building but have since disappeared.



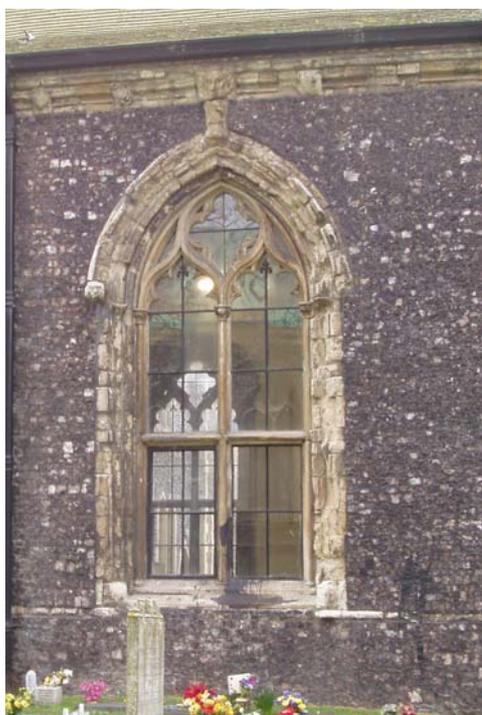
from the church guide book by Paul P Davies

There are four large traceried windows which light the hall. They are contemporary with the screen and contain restored tracery within the original moulded reveals. The tracery no doubt reflects the original and in fact incorporates some of the original little carved capitals.



Retained C14 seaweed capital

One of the most striking features of the tracery is the presence in each window of a transom which is not normally found until much later and forming part of the tracery proper in the head of the window. If it is not a Victorian invention its function could have been to disguise an internal division of some sort. The transom used as a disguise can be seen on the facade of Binham Priory where the aisle windows are divided by a transom to disguise the vault which traverses the window. There is no evidence here that any such division existed. However, the Cotman etching does give the impression of a floor/ceiling directly above the level of the screen (see below).



The moulded reveals are in a poor state and there have been various attempts to protect the ashlar from erosion. Most of the windows have had hood moulds introduced which has compromised seriously the original profiles of the openings. However, it is possible to see the original mouldings especially on the east window of the north side where the hood of the window finishes with an ogee topped with a fleuron which penetrates the moulded cornice. The cornices are exceptional pieces of sculpture with the bold mouldings interrupted by gargoyles and bosses. The gargoyles, which are, of course, for discharging rain water, suggest that the cornices supported a parapet originally and that the roof was probably shallow pitched.



Cornice to south side



Cornice to north side

The outside walls have facings of knapped flint. On the south side they are simply knapped and laid random; whilst on the north side, facing the church, they are knapped and squared of a quality equal to that on the Bridewell in Norwich.

On the interior at the west end are some openings on the south side which may have led to the prior's lodging. It now leads into a Victorian Gothic revival building. In the corner of the entrance lobby, an apparently medieval quoin is revealed. It is not clear what this relates to but it may be a remaining fragment of the Prior's lodging which was demolished in the 17th century. The doorway is late medieval with moulded



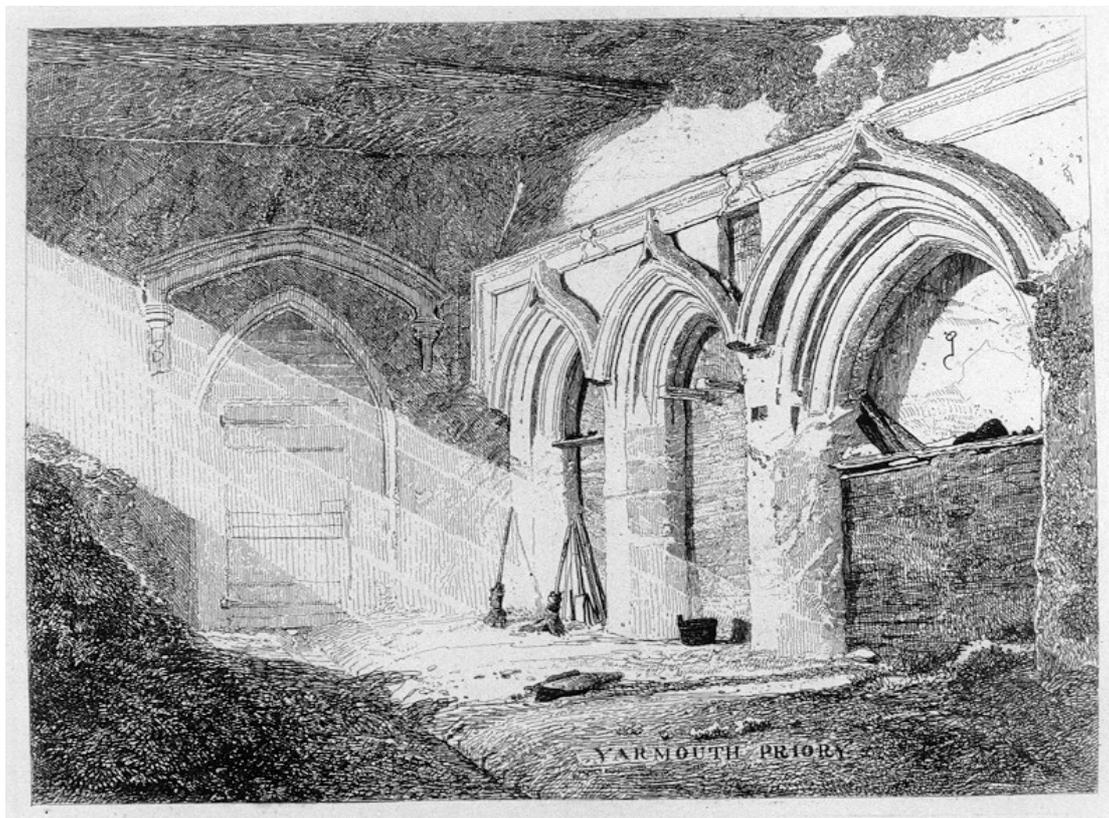
reveals and nook shafts. A square hood forms spandrels which are decorated with shields. It will be noticed that the doorway is treated as if it was an exterior doorway announcing a space rather than retiring from one. Above the doorway is a small blocked loop which may have been a squint. Above this is a kind of clerestory with a pair of unsplayed arched windows with acutely sloping sills. Were these just for light when next to the far larger hall windows? It seems more likely that they overlooked the hall and may have been for musicians with the large openings designed for letting sound out rather than light.

As regards the later buildings which abut the hall from three directions there appears to be very little of any particular

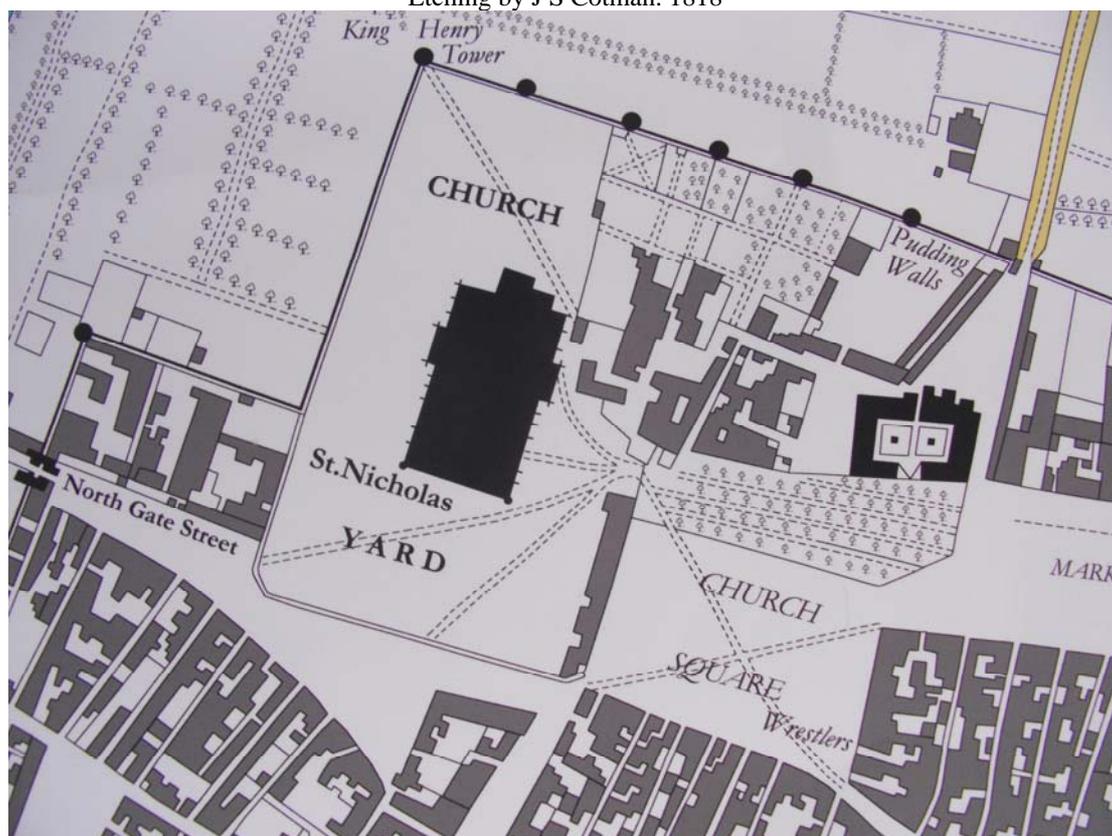
architectural interest. However, the formerly adjoining vicarage which was also in the ownership of Norwich Cathedral Priory is of very considerable interest and the redundant medieval doorway in the extension of the north wall of the hall may have been the entrance to its predecessor.

This is an interim report which needs to be followed up with results and references from further documentary research and with a history of the later buildings on the site.

Stephen Heywood FSA. November 2006



Etching by J S Cotman. 1818



Detail of Faden's map. AD1797