

A
little book of
Spalding



NANCY SNOWDON

The Priors Prison



On the corner of Sheep Market (now known as 'No. 1') there is the most interesting building in Spalding town and certainly the oldest. It is the only part of Spalding Priory left standing, apart from the Vaccary in Fulney. It is, in its own right, unique. It has been recently beautifully restored from near collapse. Built just outside the priory precinct, (which is marked by the buildings behind it in the Burgess watercolour) it dates back to 1230, and was built solidly of brick and stone by Spalding Priory, in the time of Simon Houghton. The bell tower was added by Prior Clement in 1305; the bell was tolled for public executions and other 'solemn occasions'. It had a cellar, a large vaulted room with 8 concentric arches, a spiral stone staircase and (later) a 2nd floor with no vaulting and a fireplace and chimney, and small windows now replaced with larger ones.

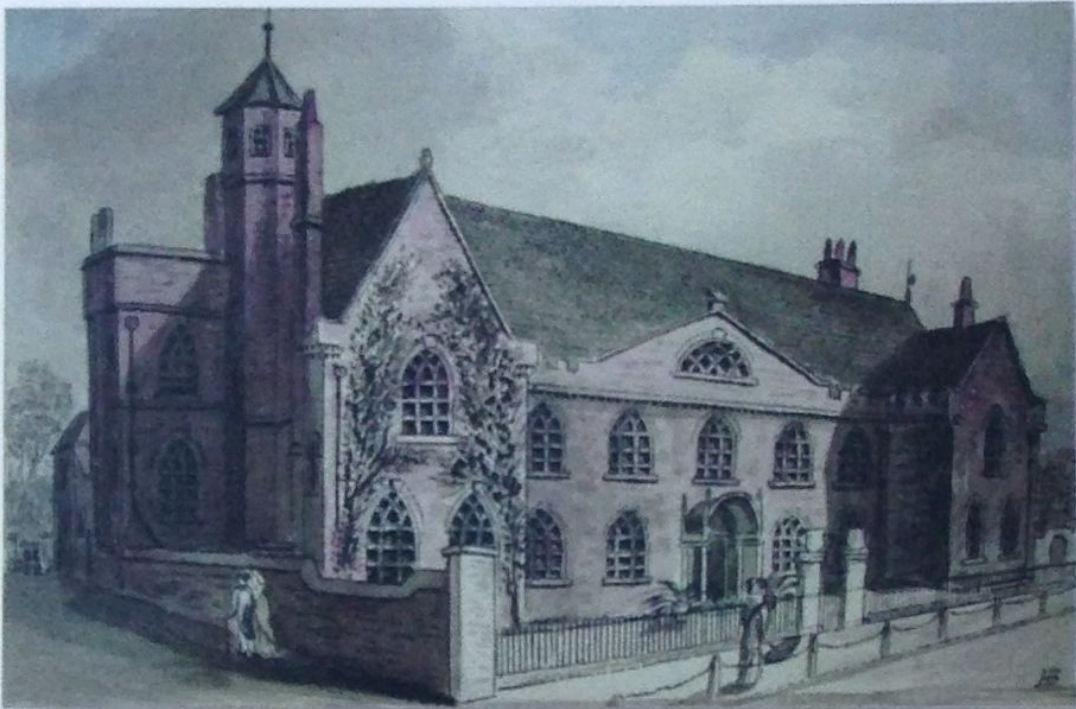
Its purpose has been much disputed. Known as the Priors

Prison, the Priors Oven, the Turrett or Turris, it has been used as a blacksmiths, a café, a shop and now a jewellers. It may have looked like a domed oven before the top floor was put on, and it may have been used as a communal oven for the townfolk. If it was an oven for the priory, that would explain its presence outside the precinct away from the main priory buildings because of fire risks. It may have been a prison, every monastery kept somewhere to shut up recalcitrant monks.



The only similar building is at the parish church at Long Sutton, where there is a 'monks cell' which used to stand on its own, built in the 13th century with a pentagonal shape, a groined roof and a newel stairway and a fireplace and chimney and modern replacement windows. Very strongly built, its original use is said to have been a muniment room, depository or library. A comparison between the two would be interesting.

Ayscoughfee



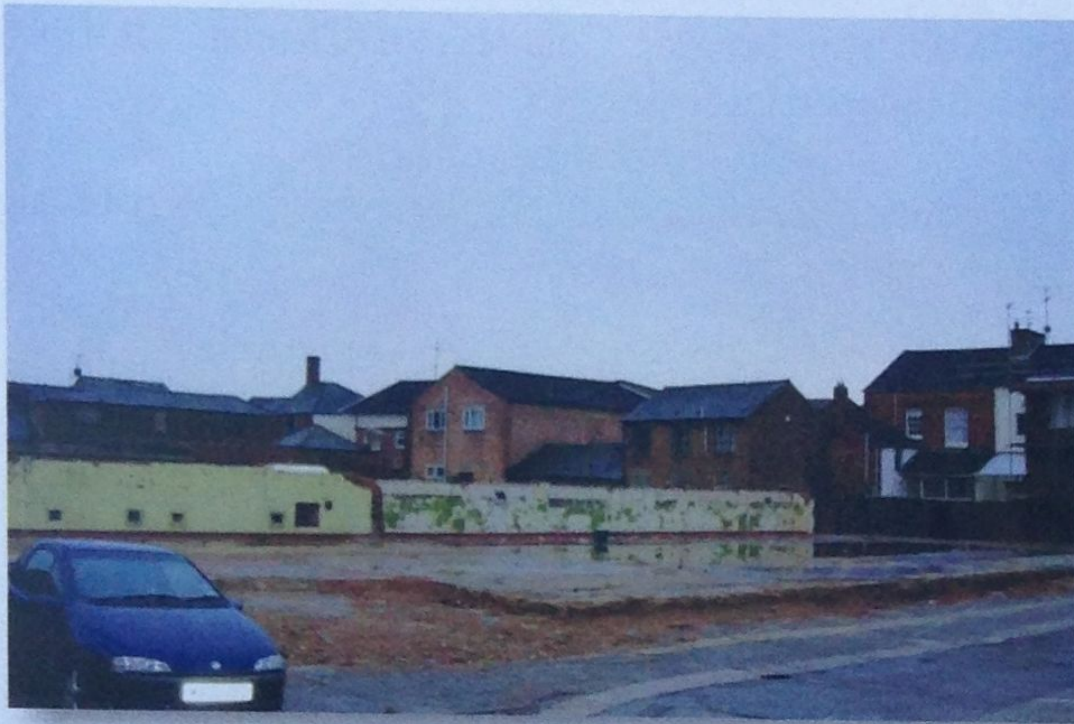
Ayscoughfee Hall was built in 1421 by a successful Spalding wool merchant called Ailwyn. He built himself a grand new mansion on the river bank in Spalding. The house is made of brick, unusual then, and had a large open hall and all the latest in accommodation. He probably had warehouses for his wool storage; the wool was shipped by boats on the Welland for export to Europe. Richard, Nicholas' father, may have started the business as a brogger, while Nicholas was so rich and successful he became Lord Mayor of London in 1499.

Since its building, all the occupants can be traced, and there is no evidence whatsoever that it was ever owned or lived in by the Ascoughs (or Askews) of Stallingborough or elsewhere. The name is much older; this prime site on the river bank has been inhabited since time immemorial. These banks were thought to be called 'the place of the trees, of ash or oak'

Akeshengh is old Norse. The name Ascough was probably derived from this, the fee comes from fief, land held of a superior lord, and defines the nature of the plot. The name was first used in a cartulary in 1274, long before the Ayscoughs' arrived in the county.

The leading family associated with Ayscoughfee were the Johnsons, who lived there for five generations. Maurice the antiquary was born there in 1688, and the family were great benefactors to Spalding. The Johnson Hospital has their initials on the facade. The last Johnson left in 1851, and the house was presented to the people of Spalding to celebrate the coronation of Edward VII in 1902.

The Priory



The site of the Priory has never been finally established, but it probably stood near the Sheep Market, on the site of an earlier manor house. There is nothing left of it now. This wealthy and famous Priory of Spalding was not actually founded until the end of the 11th century. It has been demonstrated that unlike Croyland, it is not a pre-conquest foundation. In about 1080, the gifts from Ivo Taillebois, the Norman soldier who became Lord of Spalding and all Holland and his rich wife Lucy enabled a monastic cell to be started, but it was to belong to a French monastery, in Angers, an alien priory. The buildings took 20 years to complete. The Priory was situated in the centre of the town with an entrance near the river, in Abbey Yard and a grand entrance called the Porta Maxima. It was to become a town in itself, walled and moated, it had its own conventual church and two private chapels, a vineyard, orchard and herb garden. The Priory bought and sold land and

the patrons were important and wealthy people, who supported it and gave money and land, particularly the descendents of Lucy who later became Countess of Chester. It finally achieved independence in 1245.

As the priory flourished, so did the town and Spalding became an important market town and port. Henry VIII closed the Priory in 1540. In 1543 it belonged to John Oldfield and in 1549 it was given to Sir John Cheke, but by 1553 had fallen into ruin and the stone was taken away in carts (5/- a cart) by permission of the bailiff, Mr Kidby. The only surviving buildings are the corner of Priors 'Prison' (No 1) now a jewellers shop at the corner of the Sheep Market, now beautifully restored but visibly 13th century, and the vaccary (dairy) in Fulney. The thatched White Horse Inn, a public house long since, was built in 1553 by William Willesby and called the Berguery, meaning farm, was one of many houses built with the priory stone. There are pieces of stone in gardens all over Spalding. The Priory was a very hospitable place and had a reputation for learning and good food. Even Kings came to stay at the Priory and John of Gaunt, Lord of Bolingbroke and Duke of Lancaster was a regular visitor. His last wife Katherine Swynford, brought her sister who was married to Geoffrey Chaucer.

The Spalding Gentlemen's Society



The Spalding Gentlemen's Society and its museum and library has been one of the best kept secrets of Spalding. After their foundation in 1712, they met at various places but now have their own premises in Broad Street. Maurice Johnson the founder of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society was a Spalding man born and bred at Ayscoughfee Hall. Born in 1688, when he was young, he was a practising barrister working from Chambers in London, and going round the provinces on circuit. When he returned to Spalding and began to settle down to a domestic life here (he had 27 children) he missed the excitement of London, and the convivial talks with friends in the then fashionable London coffee houses. So in 1710 he started something similar at the coffee house in Abbey Yard, Spalding. It was a great success and in 1712 he formed the



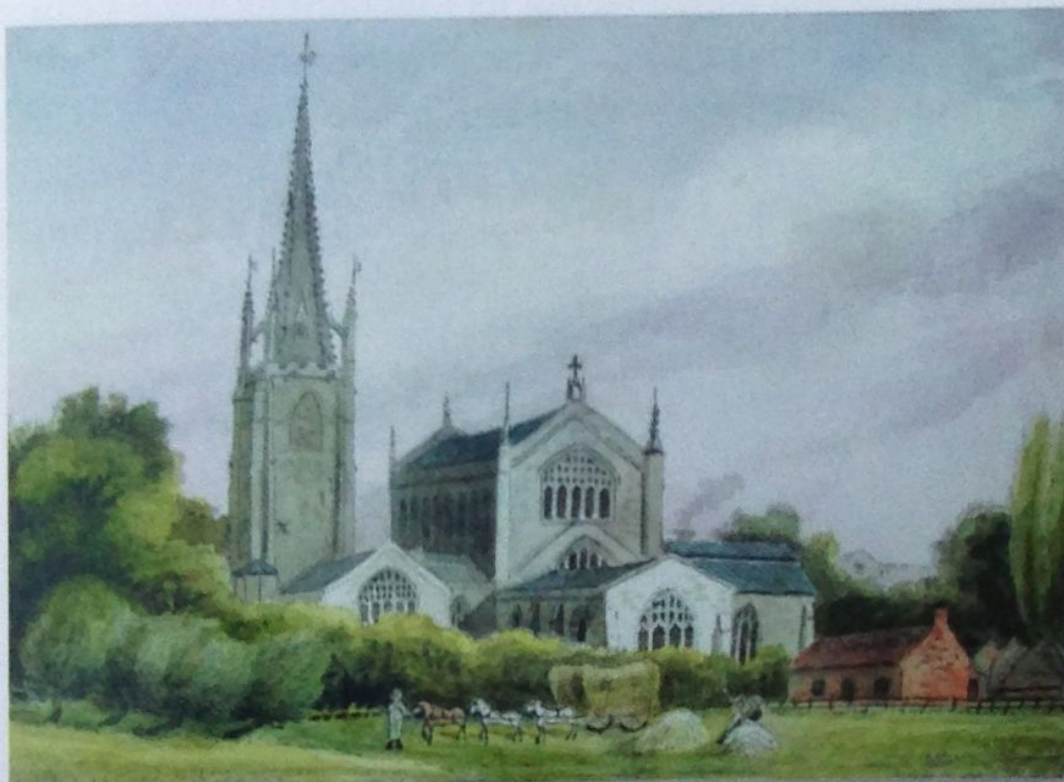
society, appointed officers and kept a minute book and the SGS was born. And they still meet regularly today; they are the second oldest museum and library in England; only the Ashmolean in Oxford is older.

The object for the members was 'the supporting of mutual benevolence and their improvement in the liberal sciences and polite learning'. At first, their meetings centred round the new periodical, the *Tatler*, which was read aloud, because only one copy came on the coach from London. They banned all talk of religion and politics, and soon their main interests became more historical and archaeological and literary. Every new member presented a book, which explains their stupendous library. Soon all sorts of notables were attracted to the society and the membership became worldwide; the list of members included everyone of eminence in the country and beyond (except women).

In 1911, their new custom-built premises in Broad Street were built to celebrate their bi-centenary. It has a most interesting facade and is a treasure house of curios and china, glass and an excellent coin and medal collection, and much of local interest.

Open lectures are held between September and March at the Grammar School, for a small fee, and visits to the museum can be arranged by application to the Hon. Curator. Ladies are now admitted as members.

The Parish Church



The Church of St Mary & St Nicholas replaced the old wooden parish church in the Market Place (St Mary Stockys) when it became unusable; it was regularly flooded and when it was badly damaged by a fierce storm, the Prior decided to build a new church on a new site on the other side of the river. In 1284 Prior Littleport, who was a great builder and built some of the Priory, started on the new cruciform church of barnack stone which had a bell tower, on the site of an old burial ground. The cemetery chapel stood there and ancient stones were used in the new building. In 1315 a chapel to the martyr St Thomas à Becket was added onto the South Transept. The upper floor became a school, later the Grammar School, until it was finally moved in 1881. It had a door opening into the churchyard which can still be seen.

In 1360 the church was widened and a tower built and soon after the spire was added on but its foundations always caused problems. The whole church was altered in the 15th century by raising the roof by adding six feet to the pillars, and in 1865-7 it was again extensively restored. Many relics were then removed but there are still some medieval carvings on the pews, and the old screen is now in the South Porch; these are connected with the Ailwyn family. There are many interesting heraldic hatchments of the Johnson family hanging in the church.

The Sessions House



The building that looks like a castle in Sheep Market is the Sessions House, so called because Quarter Sessions were held there; now it is the Magistrates Courts. Built in 1842-3, designed by Charles Kirk of Sleaford and costing £6,000, it is described as “a large and handsome building in the Tudor style”. It replaced the Town Hall that had stood since 1620 in what was then the Hemp Market, now Hall Place, which was a multi-purpose meeting place for social evenings, courts, meetings and assemblies and even a theatre. The fire engine was kept underneath and the butchers shambles stood at the side. It was all demolished in 1773. Although there are cells underneath the Sessions House, it was never a prison. The prison was in Broad Street, built in 1619 as a house of correction, for the ‘keeping and correcting and setting to work of rogues, vagabonds, sturdie beggars and other vagrant idle and disorderly persons’. It was

used until 1834 and then demolished and the site partly used for the Methodist church. A new prison was built next to the Sessions House in the Sheep Market, completed in 1836. It had all conveniences, a human treadmill for the prisoners to walk on to grind their own flour, lots of cells for solitary confinement and 48 sleeping cells and a chapel. It was soon demolished and Lloyds Bank was built on the site.



Executions took place publicly in Spalding Market Place. The last man to be hung was in 1742, and his body was afterwards 'gibbeted' on Vernats Bank. (Hung in Chains). Spalding also used stocks and a pillory, and a tumbrel. Many were flogged publically outside the Sessions House and some were pilloried in the wooden frame on wheels called the 'white willie'. The last woman to be publically pilloried was in 1787. The Prior also had the right to execute criminals and had his own gallows. The town gallows were on the Pinchbeck Road.



Dishonest traders were paraded round the town in the tumbrel, and nagging wives and scolds were 'ducked' in the trebucket or ducking stool, in the nearest pond.