CROYLAND ABBEY

Official Guide

£1.50
VISITOR’S GUIDE
to
CROYLAND ABBEY
(OUR LADY, ST. BARTHOLOMEW AND ST. GUTHLAC)
AND TRINITY BRIDGE

Compiled by

Rector of Croyland, 1981-86,
Rural Dean of Elloe (West) 1983-86

Dedicated to friends and Parishioners in Crowland
Proceeds to the maintenance of the Abbey

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Croyland Abbey coat of arms.

The whip is that presented to Guthlac by St. Bartholomew, the knife the symbol of St. Bartholomew's martyrdom.
INTRODUCTION

As one travels across the flatness of the South Lincolnshire Fens, it is difficult to imagine that the whole area, which is now some of Britain’s most fertile and productive areas of arable land, was once entirely marsh and wetland, with a series of isolated and inhospitable islands. Upon one such island, known as Croyland, was established almost thirteen centuries ago, a small church and hermitage which was later to become one of the nation’s most important Benedictine monasteries. The present parish church of Crowland, though still magnificent and impressive, is only a very small part of the great edifice which was to be seen on this site in past generations. During those centuries, Croyland Abbey has had many fortunes, both good and bad, and its history makes a fascinating story.
Saint Guthlac
Our story begins at the very end of the 7th century AD. A young man named Guthlac, who was a soldier and the son of a Mercian nobleman called Penwald and his wife Tette, had decided to give up the military life for the habit of a monk. He joined the monastery at Repton in Derbyshire at the age of 24. After two years, he sought greater seclusion and obtained permission to adopt the life of a hermit. With a boatman called Tatwin and a servant by the name of Beccelm, Guthlac sought a desolate spot in the Fens, and landed on the island of Croyland on St. Bartholomew’s Day, 699 AD.

The story of Guthlac’s life is told by his biographer, the monk Felix, who was almost his contemporary, and is illustrated in the Guthlac Roll, a series of beautifully detailed drawings of the 12th century. The Guthlac Roll is kept in the British Library, but copies of it can be seen on display in the Abbey.

Guthlac and his companions set up small cells and a simple oratory. Here Guthlac lived until his death in 714 AD. It was a miserable existence. Felix says that Guthlac dressed in skins, and the only nourishment he took was a scrap of barley bread and a small cup of muddy water after sunset! Ague and marsh fever assailed him, and the inhabitants of the island were
rough and barbarous. It is not surprising that he thought of these evils as personal attacks on him by demons. This is how Felix describes them:

“they were ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape, with great heads, long necks, thin faces, yellow complexions, filthy beards, shaggy ears, wild foreheads, fierce eyes, foul mouths, horses’ teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, strident voices, singed hair, fat cheeks, pigeon breasts, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, splay feet, spreading mouths, raucous cries.”

When, in his distress, they had carried him off to the very jaws of hell, the Apostle Saint Bartholomew, his patron, appeared to him in a vision, rescued him and gave him a scourge or whip to ward off his assailants.

Guthlac at the mouth of Hell receiving a whip from St. Bartholomew

Guthlac gained a reputation for holiness of life, and was visited by many people in search of spiritual counsel. One who came to him was Ethelbald, a pretender to the throne of Mercia, fleeing from his cousin Coelred. Guthlac prophesied that Ethelbald would become king, and the latter vowed that in that event he would build an abbey on that site in honour of Guthlac. He fulfilled his vow by laying the foundation stone on St. Bartholomew’s Day, 716 AD.
The early days of the Abbey

The story of Croyland Abbey is told in the “Croyland Chronicle”, which purports to have been written by the historian-abbot, Ingulphus (1076-1109), and continued by other writers. It is, however, contended that it is, in fact, a fourteenth-century production which contains many inaccuracies and anachronisms. Many medieval monasteries claimed a greater antiquity and continuity than can be proven today, but we should not simply dismiss the Chronicle as a spurious forgery; it is a valuable part of the corporate memory and tradition of the community which lived and worked and worshipped here.

According to the Chronicle, Ethelbald gave extensive lands to the monks of Crowland, which he guaranteed in a Charter. He appointed Kenulph, a monk of Evesham, to be the first Abbot. The first buildings were probably of wood or wattle with thatched roofs. None of this structure still stands, although some of the oak piles used for foundations have been unearthed. It is probably inaccurate to say that the monks could be called “Benedictine” at this stage.

The coming of the Danes

In 870 AD the Danes over-ran the country, and attacked the Abbey. The story is told of some of the monks escaping with the body of St. Guthlac, his psalter and whip, and some jewels and charters, having buried the Abbey’s plate in the well in the cloister – it has never yet been found! The Danes murdered the Abbot Theodore and some of the monks as they were celebrating Mass, and in an attempt to discover more treasures, broke open many of the tombs. Being disappointed, the attackers heaped up the bodies and burned them, and the monastery buildings. They then went and destroyed Peterborough Abbey, only to lose the plunder they had gained in the River Nene. It is said that only Turgar, a boy-monk ten years of age, escaped in disguise and joined some of the other monks who had found their way to Thorney. The community barely survived, in a most depressed state, and with very few monks.

The Second Abbey

In 946 AD, the three remaining aged monks were visited in their ruined church by Turketyl, the chancellor of King Edred. He was so impressed by their holiness and hospitality that he became a monk and resolved to join their community. Turketyl was appointed abbot, and under the direction of
the king, embarked upon the restoration of the monastery, building in the Saxon style. The community now lived according to the Rule of St. Benedict. The Chronicle gives details of the lands and possessions granted to the monks, and a description of some aspects of their communal life, and of the buildings in which they lived.

The Great Fire
No part of Turketly’s Abbey now survives, because it was all razed to the ground in the disastrous fire of 1091. A plumber working on the tower had banked down his fire with ashes, but the wind got up during the night and caused the embers to blaze up. Soon all the buildings were alight, and Abbot Ingulphus gives a dramatic eye-witness account of the destruction, not only of the church and monastic buildings, but also of the library, with its valuable charters and manuscripts, and a curious and costly sphere designed to illustrate the working of the solar system. Ingulphus immediately set about reconstruction, but he must have been an indifferent builder, because his work was all levelled to the ground at the next rebuilding.

During the abbacy of Ingulphus, we are told that there were 62 monks belonging to the Abbey, besides over 100 other monks’ from other monasteries, each of whom had a stall in the choir, a seat in the refectory, and a bed in the dormitory.

At this time, Hereward the Wake was leading a resistance against the Normans, and was finally said to have been buried at Croyland Abbey with his wife Torfrida, and perhaps his mother, Lady Godiva.

The Third Abbey
In 1109, Joffrid of Orleans became the 15th Abbot, and began a most extensive reconstruction of the church and monastic buildings in the Norman style. In 1113, 28 foundation stones were laid for the new building. A great feast and meal was held for more than 5,000 people within the Abbey precincts, whilst the Abbot of Thorney, and of Croyland and 400 monks were fed in the refectory. In 1118 an earthquake destroyed much of the new work at Croyland, which was yet without a roof. Parts of Joffrid’s Abbey can still be seen:

(a) the fine norman dog-tooth west arch of the central tower;
(b) the west front of the south aisle and a doorway into the north aisle;
(c) the eastern halves of the two most easterly arches of the Nave;
(d) the font, built into the south pier of the east arch of the tower.

The Chronicle states that, during the abbacy of Joffrid, monks were sent from Croyland to Cambridge. They hired a barn and gave lectures, and the number of their students expanded so much that great profit accrued to the Abbey, and eventually the great University came to birth through their efforts. This story may be doubted, but what is certain is that Abbot Lytlington, in 1428, established in Cambridge a Hostel for student-monks of the Benedictine Order, which was later to become Magdalene College. The Heraldic Arms of the Abbey can still be seen in the quadrangle of that College.

In 1143, another fire destroyed a great part of the work begun by Joffrid.

The Fourth Abbey
Successive abbots undertook further rebuildings and alterations; Henry de Longchamps built the West Front from the spring of the arch to the top. Abbots Overton, Upton and Lytlington built in the Perpendicular style. William of Wermington, master mason, whose monument can be seen in the tower, was responsible for the vaulting in the north aisle. The north-west tower was built in 1427.

Life in the monastery
Although the monks individually took a vow of poverty, the monasteries in the Middle Ages became very wealthy corporate bodies, due to the generosity of benefactors. They were major landowners in medieval times. Croyland Abbey owned land in six counties, and had the right of presentation of the priest in fifty parishes. The abbots had seats in Parliament, lived in a manner not very different from feudal lords, and were much concerned with affairs of state, and the temporal duties of large-scale landowners. The Abbey was often involved in legal and financial disputes.

The timetable of a typical day in the monastery gives an idea of the activities of the monks (times varied according to the season of the year):