

Lincolnshire Sketchbook

by
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Crowland Abbey

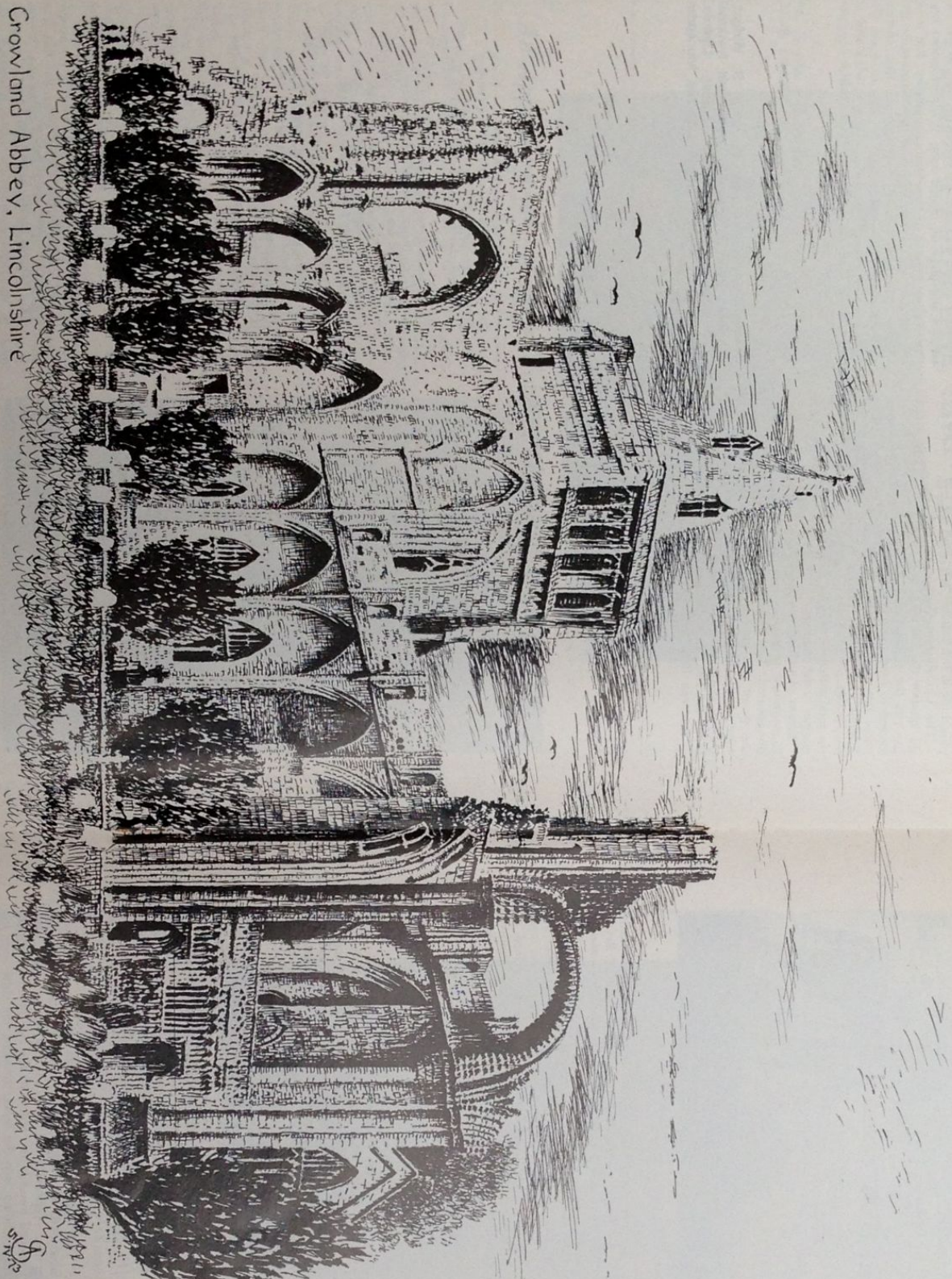
Crowland stands isolated in the midst of the Fens, overlooking on all sides a vast expanse of low flat country. In the old days, the site of Crowland appears to have been a desolate oozy island, surrounded by swamps and meres abounding in fish and wild fowl. The famous Abbey of the Benedictine Order was founded in 714 by Ethelbald, King of Mercia, in honour of St Guthlac, the Patron Saint of the Fens.

St Guthlac was the son of a Mercian nobleman and was born in 673. At the age of 24 he reformed from a life of fighting and plundering, and sought refuge in the Abbey at Repton in Yorkshire. There he stayed for two years; but craving for solitude and a more austere life, he left the monastery and went in search of a lonely island in the marshes. Under the guidance of Tatwine, a boatman, he decided to land where the boat should first be stranded. Thus on St Bartholomew's Day 699 he arrived with his servant Beocelm on the desolate island of Crowland.

The site of the landing and cell, a quarter of a mile east of the Abbey, is still known as the Anchorite or Anchor Church Hill. There St Guthlac lived a life of prayer and devotion, and the wild birds of the island became his friends and resided in the thatch of his lonely cell. Soon, however, his solitude was broken by the numbers who sought his advice and direction, among whom was the fugitive king, Ethelbald of Mercia. But on the Wednesday of Passion Week 714 he died. Two years later Ethelbald had the foundation stone of the Abbey which was to perpetuate the memory of the great Saint and to be a thankoffering for the help and advice he had received from him.

Rebuilt and reconstructed a number of times, the remains today are chiefly those of the fourth Abbey which was really a work of reconstruction, since much of the old material was reshaped and erected in the perpendicular style between 1392 and 1469.

At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 the old and wealthy foundation was surrendered and soon stripped of all its treasures and beauty. Among the wreckage left from demolition of choir, transepts and central tower, was left standing the western arch, the nave and aisles to be formed into a church for the use of the town. Following bombardment in 1643 by Cromwell and many years of isolation and neglect, the north side of the nave remains to serve as the parish church.



Crowland Abbey, Lincolnshire