



West Acre Priory, and square barrow within the precinct

Overview

Heritage Category:
Scheduled Monument

List Entry Number:
1008352

Date first listed:
30-Nov-1925

Date of most recent amendment:
08-Nov-1994

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Location

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County:

Norfolk

District:

King's Lynn and West Norfolk (District Authority)

Parish:

West Acre

National Grid Reference:

TF 78205 14994

Reasons for Designation

From the time of St Augustine's mission to re-establish Christianity in AD 597 to the reign of Henry VIII, monasticism formed an important facet of both religious and secular life in the British Isles. Settlements of religious communities, including monasteries, were built to house communities of monks, canons (priests), and sometimes lay-brothers, living a common life of religious observance under some form of systematic discipline. It is estimated from documentary evidence that over 700 monasteries were founded in England. These ranged in size from major communities with several hundred members to tiny establishments with a handful of brethren. They belonged to a wide variety of different religious orders, each with its own philosophy. As a result, they vary considerably in the detail of their appearance and layout, although all possess the basic elements of church, domestic accommodation for the community, and work buildings. Monasteries were inextricably woven into the fabric of medieval society, acting not only as centres of worship, learning, and charity, but also, because of the vast landholdings of some orders, as centres of immense wealth and political influence. They were established in all parts of England, some in towns and others in the remotest of areas. Many monasteries acted as the foci of wide networks including parish churches, almshouses, hospitals, farming estates and tenant villages. Some 225 of these religious houses belonged to the order of St Augustine. The Augustinians were not monks in the strict sense, but rather communities of canons - or priests - living under the rule of St Augustine. In England they came to be known as 'black canons' because of their dark coloured robes and to distinguish them from the Cistercians who wore light clothing. From the 12th century onwards, they undertook much valuable work in the parishes, running almshouses, schools and hospitals as well as maintaining and preaching in parish churches. It was from the churches that they derived much of their revenue. The Augustinians made a major contribution to many facets of medieval life and all of their monasteries which exhibit significant surviving archaeological remains are worthy of protection.

West Acre Priory is one of the larger monastic foundations in Norfolk and one of five religious houses sited along the Nar Valley, including two others of the Augustinian order. The monastic precinct, within boundaries which remain virtually intact, contains a wide variety of structural remains and features, many of which have been disturbed very little by later building, landscaping or agriculture. The standing remains of buildings in the outer court survive particularly well, and the excavations of the 1920s, while limited in scope and on a small scale, have

shown something of the nature and quality of the remains which are preserved below the present ground surface. The monument illustrates the general layout and organisation of the monastery as a whole and will retain important archaeological information concerning many different aspects of the life and economy of the monastic community and the history of the site, up to and including the dissolution and the subsequent dismantling and destruction of most of the buildings.

Square barrows are funerary monuments of the Middle Iron Age, most examples dating from the period between c.500 BC and c.50 BC. The majority of these monuments are found in the area between the River Humber and the southern slopes of the North Yorkshire Moors but a wider distribution has also been identified, principally through aerial photography, spreading through the river valleys of the Midlands and south Essex. Around 200 square barrow cemeteries have been recorded; in addition, a further 250 sites consisting of single barrows or small groups of barrows have been identified. Square barrows, which may be square or rectangular, were constructed as earthen mounds surrounded by a ditch and covering one or more bodies. Slight banks around the outer edge of the ditch have been noted in some examples. The main burial is normally central and carefully placed in a rectangular or oval grave pit, although burials placed on the ground surface below the mound are also known. A number of different types of burial have been identified, accompanied by grave goods which vary greatly in range and type. The most elaborate include the dismantled parts of a two-wheeled vehicle placed in the grave with the body of the deceased. Ploughing and intensive land use since prehistoric times have eroded and levelled most square barrows and very few remain as upstanding monuments, although the ditches and grave pits, with their contents, will survive beneath the ground surface. The different forms of burial and the variations in the type and range of artefacts placed in the graves provide important information on the beliefs, social organisation and material culture of these Iron Age communities and their development over time. All examples of square barrows which survive as upstanding earthworks, and a significant proportion of the remainder, are considered of national importance and worthy of protection.

The square barrow included within the precinct of West Acre Priory survives very well as an earthwork and, in a region where very few monuments of this type have been recorded, it is of considerable interest. It will contain archaeological information of particular importance for the study of the Iron Age population of north west Norfolk

Details

The Priory of St Mary and All Saints, West Acre, is situated immediately to the south of the parish church of All Saints in West Acre village, in the valley of the River Nar. The monument comprises a single area containing the monastic precinct, which extends to north and south of the river and is enclosed by the remains of a boundary wall. Within the precinct are the upstanding and earthwork remains of monastic buildings and a variety of associated features. In the south eastern part, and included in the scheduling, is a square barrow of much earlier, prehistoric date.

West Acre Priory was founded as a house of Augustinian Canons around or before 1135 by the Lord of the Manor, Ralph de Toni and his family. The priory was comparatively large and wealthy, with up to 26 canons, although from the later 14th century onward, the recorded numbers never exceeded 20. The original endowment, which included the manor and church of West Acre, was augmented by further gifts during the 13th century, and in 1291 the community is listed as having an annual income of 140 pounds 5s 7d. In the first half of the 15th century, the income is recorded as 256 pounds 11s. The priory, with its dependent cell of Great Massingham was dissolved in 1538, and the site, with the manor of West Acre, was granted by Henry VIII to Mary, Duchess of Richmond and Somerset for life.

The priory precinct is entered from the north by a gatehouse which still stands c.10m to the west of the parish church. The remains of the priory church and the conventual buildings, which are the heart of the monastic complex, lie on the north side of the river, c.95m south east of the gatehouse, and the ruins of a separate building stand due south of them, isolated on the opposite side of the river. The outer court, containing agricultural buildings and buildings to house domestic services and industries, such as the granary, bakehouse, brewhouse and laundry, occupies the area to the west of the conventual buildings in the north western part of the precinct. The remaining outer parts of the precinct to the south and east, including meadows which

slope up from the valley bottom on the southern side, contain fishponds, water control features and also field boundary earthworks which are thought to be of monastic date.

The gatehouse, which is Listed Grade I and is included in the scheduling, is dated to the 14th century and is built chiefly of coursed flint with stone dressings. The wide entrance arch is surmounted by three coats of arms in stone, with a lancet window set in the gable above. The bay within is vaulted with brick infilling. Originally there was a second inner bay to the south and the south face includes the broken stubs of the east and west walls, with the springing of the vault to either side of the arch. Above the arch, the south wall of the upper chamber is of brick with courses of reused chalk above. The upper chamber is now roofless.

The general outline of the monastic church and adjacent buildings can be established from fragments which stand above ground, and from substantial earthworks which mark areas of fallen masonry and the buried remains of walls. The survival of masonry beneath the earthworks was confirmed and further details of the plan were revealed by limited excavations carried out in 1927-28. The layout of the buildings and many details of the plan are similar to those of the Cluniac priory at Castle Acre, c.3km to the east although on a slightly smaller scale.

The church is c.77m in total length and includes an aisled nave of six bays with lateral towers at the western end, transepts to north and south of a central crossing and, at the eastern end, a square-ended presbytery with an aisle to the south. Part of the south western tower, which is Listed Grade II*, and a short section of the adjacent wall of the south aisle of the nave still stand to a height of c.10m and contain medieval features of varying date, including stone mouldings and blocked round headed and pointed arches. The west face and towers were added to the original church, probably in the early 13th century, and the presbytery is also thought to have been extended during that period. Architectural fragments of 14th century date found in excavation of the area of the southern transept and presbytery are evidence for extensive rebuilding or remodelling of the church after a fire in 1286. Later additions include a Lady Chapel to the north of the presbytery and a sacristy (a repository for sacred vessels and vestments) to the south of it, both dated by the excavator to the 15th century.

The conventual buildings are grouped around a cloister c.28m square on the south side of the church. In the ruined western range, the walls of a large part of the lower floor remain standing. This lower floor is divided by interior walls into four apartments and would have been used chiefly for storage with perhaps an outer parlour. According to the usual monastic arrangement, the floor above would have contained a guest hall or apartments used by the prior. The original building is dated to the earlier 12th century, and the westernmost compartment was evidently modified to accommodate the later south west tower of the church. The walls display medieval features of various different dates including a blocked, round headed arched opening with roll moulding in the west wall of the southernmost compartment, a blocked pointed arch in the adjacent north wall, and a round headed doorway in the west wall of the apartment to south of the tower, as well as stone jambs of various blocked or altered openings. The east range includes the remains of the chapter house immediately to the south of the south transept, and of the undercroft of the dormer (dormitory) beyond it. The chapter house, where the daily business of the priory was discussed, is c.13m long east-west, with an apsidal east end. Part of the western end of the south wall still stands to a height of c.8m and includes stone mouldings, as well as evidence of rebuilding and alteration with blocked openings and reused stone. Some of the earlier stonework shows signs of burning. The remains of the chapter house are Listed Grade II. The buried wall footings of the rere-dorter (latrine block) run east-west across the southern end of the dormer, well beyond the southern claustral range and close to the river, which will have supplied water for a drain running beneath the building. The range along the south side of the cloister will, according to custom, have contained the refectory. The remains of a separate building, probably the kitchen, lie west of this to the south of the junction between the west and south ranges. A fragment of the west wall c.6m long, constructed of dressed stone at the base, stands c.6m from the line of the southern wall of the claustral range. The base of a south western angle, almost certainly of the same building, was recorded c.12m west of the standing fragment in excavations for a swimming pool in 1987. Against the north wall there was a stone hearth, heavily burnt.

The modern farmhouse, situated west of the south west tower of the priory church, occupies the probable site of the prior's lodging. The house, which is externally of 18th century and later date, contains some reused stone but is not known to include any original walls of monastic date. It is Listed Grade II and is excluded from the scheduling, although the ground beneath it is included.

In the angle between the eastern claustral range and the east end of the church there is a second court, bordered on the north side by the earthwork remains of large, masonry structures. By

analogy with other monastic sites, including Castle Acre Priory, these are likely to be the infirmary hall and ancillary buildings. A fragment of standing wall survives at the southern end of this complex, alongside the river.

The monastic cemetery almost certainly occupies the area on the opposite side of the east end of the church, to the north and east of the north transept, where there is evidence for a walled enclosure. The bank containing the remains of a wall which forms the western boundary of this enclosure, running north westwards from the south western angle of the north transept, continues beyond the enclosure towards the precinct boundary east of the parish church and divides this northern part of the precinct.

The isolated building south of the river has been dated to the late 14th or 15th century and may have been a detached guest hall or associated with a school which is recorded in the 15th century as having been attached to the monastery. It was of two storeys and measures c.33m north east-south west by 12m overall, including a later extension of 4m at the south western end. Parts of the walls of the middle section stand and display various architectural features and openings of medieval and early post-medieval date. The original south west end wall still stands to almost full height and includes a large window opening with moulded stone jambs at the level of the upper floor. The building contains a small internal, vaulted cell against the north wall, and another which is probably a post-medieval insertion within the south west angle. It is Listed Grade II.

The outer court of the monastery, in the north western part of the precinct, includes a long range of medieval buildings aligned north-south. At the centre of these is a late medieval barn built of coursed flint and stone, with outer walls which remain largely unaltered by post-medieval and modern modifications. The long walls and south end wall are buttressed and in the west wall there are two cart entrances with original stone jambs. A detached gable wall which stands c.25m to the north of this building is all that remains above ground of another barn which adjoined it end to end. It is of similar construction, with two broken buttresses on the north face. The standing building and the detached gable wall are together Listed Grade II*. The listing is considered appropriate for the future management and protection of the standing barn, which remains in use and is excluded from the scheduling, although the ground beneath it is included, as is the detached gable wall.

To the south of the barn, at a distance of c.5m, are the ruined walls and earthwork remains of at least two more stone buildings conjoined end to end. The standing walls, which are Listed Grade II, are chiefly of coursed flint and chalk, with dressed stone quoins and mouldings. They display blocked openings and other features of medieval or later date, including an arched doorway with stone jambs in the south end of the wall of the northern section. The ground surface to the east of the buildings is uneven and probably contains foundations of other structures below the surface. Towards the southern end of the range, earthworks up to 1m in height show the outline of an adjoining building extending to the west at right angles. The line of the south wall of this extension is continued westwards by a slight bank and a scarp. The north-south line of the range as a whole is continued at either end by other features. From the southern end of the buildings, a bank containing masonry extends southward to the river and beyond the detached gable wall, running northwards to the precinct boundary, there is a slight bank with a pronounced scarp to the east.

The supply of water needed for sanitation, to feed the fishponds and to service the activities of the outer court, was an important factor in the siting of medieval monasteries, and the precinct at West Acre includes several large scale water control features of medieval date. Chief of these is the river itself, which runs here in a canal to the north of its original course in the valley bottom. The channel is steep and quite deeply dug in places and the sides have been banked up artificially at the shallower points.

On the north side of the river, in the area to the east of the conventual buildings, there is a series of fishponds aligned parallel to each other. They are linked by channels c.4m wide, now partly infilled, and each is also connected to the river by a short channel at the south eastern end. Sluices will have controlled the flow of water to, from and between them. The easternmost pond, near the eastern boundary of the precinct, is largely silted and visible as a rectangular, damp hollow measuring c.50m north west-south east by 18m north east-south west, with a smaller, connected pond at the north western end. Its sides are retained by low banks. A second large pond, which measures c.40m in length by c.30m and still contains water, lies c.55m to the west of the first, and a shallow depression in the ground surface between them marks the site of a third and smaller pond. Another set of fishponds is located c.140m south west of these, on the edge of the water meadows on the far side of the river and adjacent to the isolated building. The ponds are visible, particularly from the air, as a series of three or four slight, rectangular hollows

measuring c.20m-25m in length and aligned north east-south west and they have been plotted from air photographs. Parts of the channels which fed and drained them and linked them to the river can still be traced alongside a network of later water meadow drains.

Earthworks further to the south formed part of an extensive system of drainage and water control. A large ditch, measuring c.18m wide and up to 1.6m deep, runs parallel to the eastern boundary of the precinct for a distance of c.180m from a point c.50m south of the crossing of the river and the precinct boundary, then curves south westwards, following the lower edge of the valley slope and skirting the water meadows. On the down slope (WNW) side of this ditch is a bank c.0.5m-0.75m high. A westward branching extension links the eastern part to a later drain. Run-off from the slope above, to the south east, was carried down from the precinct wall by another ditch of similar width. The precinct to the east of the ditch is divided by two field boundary earthworks, both running east-west and each comprising a bank c.4m wide at the base and 0.5m high, with a ditch 2m wide to the north of it.

The remains of a boundary wall are clearly visible along the west, south and east sides of the precinct as a bank which runs along or just within modern field boundaries. The bank measures between 4m and 8m in width at the base, and up to 1m in height, and can be seen in many places to contain the footings of a wall of flint and chalk. On the north side of the precinct, the boundary is aligned roughly east-west to either end of the parish church. To the west of the church, the line is followed by later walls of flint, brick and reused stone which are thought to overlie earlier foundations and which are included in the scheduling. A short length of wall runs from the south west corner of the church to the south east corner of the gatehouse, and a longer length runs westwards from the south west corner of the gatehouse to the north west corner of the precinct. East of the church, the line is marked by a low bank except at the western end, and adjacent to the church. Here it runs through a modern churchyard extension, where the foundations of a flint wall have been recorded, but no earthwork is visible. The churchyard extension is still in use and is therefore not included in the scheduling. The bank immediately to the west of the churchyard boundary tops a steep scarp c.2m high to the north, and east of this it is bordered on the north side by a hollow way c.7m wide, which is also visible as an earthwork in pasture. In the area between the scarp and the hollow way to the south and the modern field boundary to the north, there are three closes, defined by earthen banks. Along the modern field boundary there is a more substantial bank overlooking another hollow way which contains the modern road, and it is probable that this defines a later extension of the monastic precinct.

The prehistoric square barrow which lies within the monastic precinct is prominently sited on a natural hillock on the south side of the valley, overlooking the river. One of the later field boundary earthworks, comprising a linear bank and ditch, runs c.9m to the west of it. The barrow is visible as a roughly square earthen mound. Standing to a height of c.0.6m and covering an area c.13m across, within a rectangular enclosure defined by a ditch c.3m wide and an outer bank c.0.25m high and 3m wide at the base. The ditch, from which earth was dug for the construction of the mound, has become largely infilled but is marked by a hollow c.0.2m deep. The enclosure has overall dimensions of c.22m square.

In addition to the farmhouse and the medieval barn, Abbey Farm Cottage on the east side of the precinct is excluded from the scheduling, together with all outbuildings, farm buildings, sheds and connected structures other than those which form part of the medieval monastic complex and have been described as included above. Also excluded are post-medieval: garden walls and a swimming pool to the south and south east of the farmhouse; all driveways and modern track and yard surfaces; various service poles and their support cables to the north east of the house and in the farmyard; a petrol pump and tank in the farm yard and an adjacent raised tank with supports; a sandpit; climbing frame and other play apparatus in a paddock in the north west part of the monument; a cricket pavilion and cricket pitch on the west side of the precinct; the base and supports for seating in an outdoor auditorium south west of the isolated building south of the river; a modern water wheel alongside the weir to the south of the farmhouse and garden and modern timber footbridges across the river and all modern boundary fences and gates, although the ground beneath all these buildings and features is included.

MAP EXTRACT The site of the monument is shown on the attached map extract.

Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System number:

21325

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Sources

Books and journals

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Other

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Edwards, D, NAU TF 7815/AJ/CV1, TF7815/AJ/CV3,

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Notes on watching brief; sketch plan, 3881 Westacre, Priory of St Mary and All Saints, (1987)

Report on watching brief, 3881 Westacre, Priory of St Mary and All Saints, (1993)

Legal

This monument is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 as amended as it appears to the Secretary of State to be of national importance. This entry is a copy, the original is held by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

End of official listing

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