

= Leicester Abbey =

The Abbey of Saint Mary de Pratis , more commonly known as Leicester Abbey , was an Augustinian religious house in the city of Leicester , in the English Midlands . The abbey was founded in the 12th century by the Robert de Beaumont , 2nd Earl of Leicester , and grew to become the wealthiest religious establishment within Leicestershire . Through patronage and donations the abbey gained the advowsons of countless churches throughout England , and acquired a considerable amount of land , and several manorial lordships . Leicester Abbey also maintained a cell (a small dependent daughter house) at Cockerham Priory , in Lancashire . The Abbey 's prosperity was boosted though the passage of special privileges by both the English Kings and the Pope . These included an exemption from sending representatives to parliament and from paying tithe on certain land and livestock . Despite its privileges and sizeable landed estates , from the late 14th century the abbey began to suffer financially and was forced to lease out its estates . The worsening financial situation was exacerbated throughout the 15th century and early 16th century by a series of incompetent , corrupt and extravagant abbots . By 1535 the abbey 's considerable income was exceeded by even more considerable debts .

The abbey provided a home to an average of 30 to 40 canons , sometimes known as Black Canons , because of their dress (a white habit and black cloak) . One of these canons , Henry Knighton , is notable for his Chronicle , which was written during his time at the abbey in the 14th century . In 1530 Cardinal Thomas Wolsey died at the abbey , whilst travelling south to face trial for treason . A few years later , in 1538 , the abbey was dissolved , and was quickly demolished , with the building materials reused in various structures across Leicester , including a mansion which was built on the site . The house passed through several aristocratic families , and became known as Cavendish House after it was acquired by the 1st Earl of Devonshire , in 1613 . The house was eventually looted and destroyed by fire in 1645 , following the capture of Leicester during the English Civil War .

Part of the former abbey precinct was donated to Leicester Town Council (the predecessor of the modern City Council) by the 8th Earl of Dysart . In 1882 it was opened by The Prince of Wales and became known as Abbey Park . The remaining 32 acres (13 ha) , which included the abbey 's site and the ruins of Cavendish House , were donated to the council by the 9th Earl of Dysart in 1925 and , following archaeological excavations , opened to the public in the 1930s . Following its demolition , the exact location of the abbey was lost ; It was only rediscovered during excavations in the 1920s / 30s , when the layout was plotted using low stone walls . The abbey has been extensively excavated and was previously used for training archaeology students at the University of Leicester . Leicester Abbey is now protected as a scheduled monument and is Grade I Listed .

= = History = =

= = = Foundation = = =

Leicester Abbey was founded during a wave of monastic enthusiasm that swept through western Christendom in the 11th and 12th centuries . This wave was responsible for the foundation of the majority of England 's monasteries , and very few were founded after the 13th century . These monasteries were often founded by a wealthy aristocratic benefactor who endowed and patronised the establishments in return for prayers for their soul , and often , the right to be buried within the monastic church . Leicester Abbey was founded in the Augustinian tradition . The monks at the abbey were known as canons , and followed the monastic rules set down by Saint Augustine of Hippo . Sometimes known as Black Canons , because of their dress (a white habit and black cloak) , Augustinian Canons lived a clerical life engaged in public ministry ; this is distinct to other forms of monasticism in which monks were cloistered from the outside world , and lived an isolated , contemplative life .

Leicester Abbey was founded in 1143 by Robert le Bossu , 2nd Earl of Leicester , and was

dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary . It was not the first abbey Robert had established , having founded Garendon Abbey , also in Leicestershire , in 1133 . Robert 's father , Robert de Beaumont , 1st Earl of Leicester , had previously founded a college of secular canons in Leicester , known as The College of St Mary de Castro . The new abbey assumed control of the college and its possessions , which included all of the churches in Leicester . Robert added to this with the gift of numerous churches in Leicestershire , Berkshire and Northamptonshire . The abbey also gained the manor of Asfordby from its merger with the college , and the manor of Knighton from its founder .

The earls of Leicester continued to patronise the abbey : Petronilla de Grandmesnil , wife of the founder 's son , Robert de Beaumont , 3rd Earl of Leicester , financed the construction of the abbey 's Great Choir ; whilst her husband donated 24 virgates (720 acres) of land at Anstey .

In 1148 , Pope Eugene III granted the abbey an exemption on paying tithe for their newly acquired land and livestock . This was granted on the condition that there was to be no impropriety or violence when electing an abbot , and that those who donated money to the abbey could be buried within it , regardless of whether they had been excommunicated .

= = = 14th century = = =

Though the abbey was a religious house , it was attacked in 1326 by the Earl of Lancaster 's soldiers , who seized property belonging to Hugh le Despenser , 1st Earl of Winchester , which was being kept there .

Under the Abbotship of William Clowne (tenure : 1345 ? 1378) the abbey prospered , increasing their lands and endowments with acquisitions such as the manors of Ingarsby and Kirkby Mallory . Clowne is described as having " friendly relations " with King Edward III , and used this to gain further privileges for the abbey , including being exempted from having to send representatives to Parliament . However , by the late 14th century , the abbey had entered a difficult period , and its income began to fall .

It was during this period that the abbey was home to canon Henry of Knighton , who wrote Knighton 's Chronicon . The chronicle includes both Knighton 's contemporary experiences , between 1377 and 1395 , and a historical section recording events between 1066 and 1366 . Knighton chronicles the impact of John Wycliffe , the rise of the Lollards , and gives an unusually favourable account of John of Gaunt . Knighton 's chronicle is valued by historians for his contemporary account of the Black Death in Leicester , which has been compared with Giovanni Boccaccio 's Decameron , which chronicles the plague in Florence . His in depth account records the effects of the Black Death on Leicester . This includes the impact on the prices of food , grain , wine and cattle , and on changes in wages and the labour market . The chronicle also includes detailed death tolls for all of Leicester 's parishes , revealing that one @-@ third of the population of Leicester were killed by the disease . Following the deaths of canons within the abbey , Knighton theorises that it was punishment because of " the ordination of candidates ill @-@ prepared and but little suited for the sacred ministry " . The chronicle was not published until 1652 .

= = = 15th century = = =

In the 15th century the abbey began to lease out its land (most probably as a solution to their falling income) . By 1477 only the demesne lands in Leicester , Stoughton and Ingarsby remained un @-@ leased , and were directly farmed by the abbey .

Philip Repyngdon served as Abbot of Leicester Abbey from 1393 to 1405 , when he resigned to become " Chaplain and Confessor " to King Henry IV , and subsequently served as Bishop of Lincoln and as a Cardinal . Repyngdon 's successor , Richard of Rothely , was granted a Royal Licence permitting him to ask the Pope for to remove the abbey from the Bishop of Lincoln 's jurisdiction , as the abbot feared Repyngdon would interfere with his former abbey , which lay within that Diocese . It is unclear if the Pope ever agreed to this petition , as Repyngdon also petitioned the Pope ; receiving a declaration confirming that Leicester Abbey was " fully subject to him and his successors " .

Under the tenure of Abbot William Sadyngton (1420 ? 42) the abbey 's fortunes fell further . A visit by William Alnwick , Bishop of Lincoln , in 1440 , revealed the number of canons had fallen from 30 to 40 to just 14 and that the number of boys in the almonry had fallen from 25 to 6 . Sadyngton was accused of various unsavory practices : of accepting unsuitable boys into the almonry in return for money , of " pocketing various minor revenues " , of " keeping the offices of treasurer and cellarer in his own hands " and of not disclosing the abbey 's accounts to his canons . Sadyngton was also known to keep servants and was even accused of practising magic , including divination .

Despite Abbot Sadyngton 's apparent financial corruption , the abbey appeared to be financially stable : the abbey 's monastic buildings had recently been extensively rebuilt and the abbey had a substantial annual income of £ 1180 . Perhaps because of the large income the Abbot was sustaining , Bishop Alnwick appears to have not taken strong measures against the Abbot 's indiscretions . He ordered that the number of canons should be increased to 30 and the number of boys in the almonry increased to 16 . The Bishop also ordered proper accounts to be kept and forbade the abbot from granting favours without the permission of both the Bishop and the Canons .

= = = 16th century = = =

In 1518 William Atwater , Bishop of Lincoln , visited to inspect the abbey . The Abbot , Richard Pescall , was , like Sadyngton , accused of financial impropriety , but also was thought to be too old to perform his duties . Pescall 's extravagances included an " excessive number of hounds " , which were known to roam freely " fouling church , chapter house and cloister " ; whilst the Bishop complained the boys in the almonry were being improperly educated .

A followup visit , in 1521 , by Bishop Atwater 's successor , John Longland , showed that things had not improved . Abbot Pescall rarely attended church services and , when he did , he would often bring his jester who " disturbed the services with his buffoonery " . The Abbot 's bad example had affected the canon 's behaviour , who ate and drank at improper times , failed to attend services (an average of 11 of the 25 canons attended) and roamed freely outside the abbey : visiting the town 's alehouses and frequently going hunting . Two canons were also accused of " incontinence " . This visit revealed the abbey was severely in debt , leading the Bishop to appoint two administrators to oversee the abbey 's finances .

The Chancellor of Lincoln Diocese visited the abbey in 1528 and found things had not improved . The abbot was still not attending services and was eating at unusual times and in unusual places , away from the other canons . The Chancellor also complained about the Abbot 's " excessive number " of servants . The 24 canons were also still in the habit of leaving the abbey without proper reason .

Bishop Longland saw no alternative but to remove Abbot Pescall , but the task was not simple as Pescall tried to secure his position by sending gifts and bribes to Thomas Cromwell , leading Bishop Longland to resort to " harassing " the Abbot by constantly interfering with affairs at the abbey . Abbot Pescall finally resigned 5 years later (10 years after his " failures " were first noticed) and was granted a pension of £ 100 a year . Pescall 's retirement was far from quiet , however . Pescall frequently wrote to Thomas Cromwell complaining about affairs at the abbey , even bemoaning the fact that £ 13 of his undeservedly generous pension of £ 100 a year was being taken in tax , and asking that the tax be paid by the abbey .

It was during Abbot Pescall 's tenure , in 1530 , that Cardinal Thomas Wolsey visited the abbey . Wolsey was an influential minister in the government of King Henry VIII . He fell from favour after failing to secure papal permission for Henry to divorce his wife Katherine of Aragon , and on 4 November 1530 was arrested for treason . While en route from Yorkshire to London , where Wolsey would be held prisoner , he fell ill . The journey took Wolsey through Leicester , and he arrived at the abbey on 26 November , declaring : " Father abbott , I ame come hether to leave my bones among you " . Wolsey died on 30 November and the public were allowed to view his remains before he was interred within the abbey 's church .

By the time Pescall was removed , the abbey 's financial position was poor : Despite being the richest monastery in Leicestershire (with an income of £ 951 in 1534) , it owed a total of £ 1 @,@

000 to debtors . John Bouchier , who would be the last abbot of the house , took control in 1534 and by 1538 had reduced the debt to £ 411 . Abbots were usually elected from among the canons of the abbey : Bouchier represented a departure from tradition . Bouchier most probably gained the position of abbot on the instigation of the influential Robert Fuller , Abbot of Waltham Abbey , and on the promise of a bribe for Henry VIII 's chief adviser , Thomas Cromwell . Exact details are unknown , but letters seem to suggest Cromwell was promised his nephew Richard Williams (Cromwell) would be given £ 100 and the lease of the abbey 's grange at Ingarsby ; the promise was only honoured in April 1536 , as Bouchier faced opposition from the canons of the abbey . Historians have suggested that in choices such as Bouchier , Cromwell may have been selecting abbots he felt would be more " pliable " his future changes to the church (i.e. the future Dissolution of the Monasteries , of which Cromwell was the architect) .

In 1527 King Henry VIII asked Pope Clement VII to annul his marriage to Katherine of Aragon , but the pope refused . This started a series of events known as English Reformation in which Henry broke away from the authority of the pope . In lieu of the pope , Henry assumed authority over the church : all priests and religious figures , including monks , were required to swear support to the royal supremacy over the church . Abbot Bouchier and the 25 canons at Leicester Abbey acknowledged the king 's royal supremacy on 11 August 1534 , thereby saving the abbey from immediate dissolution .

Thomas Cromwell , Henry 's Chief Minister , had long since had his eyes on the wealth of English monasteries ; at the time they owned approximately a quarter of all the realm 's landed wealth . Starting in 1534 , Cromwell had each of the monasteries inspected , with the establishment 's wealth and endowments recorded , along with frequent reports of impropriety , vice and excess . These reports were compiled into volumes known as the Valor Ecclesiasticus . Leicester abbey was inspected by Richard Layton , in 1535 , who complimented Abbot Bouchier as an honest man , but who tried to bring charges of " adultery and unnatural vice " against the abbey 's canons . Abbot Bouchier sought to gain Thomas Cromwell 's favour to protect his canons and abbey ; in 1536 sending him £ 100 and gifts of sheep and oxen . This was ultimately fruitless : Cromwell had convinced King Henry of the immoral behaviour within England 's monasteries and thus between 1536 and 1541 they were all suppressed and dissolved : their land , property and wealth transferred to the king . The abbot 's attempts at bribery could not save Leicester Abbey , and it was finally surrendered to the crown for dissolution in 1538 .

= = = After dissolution = = =

After dissolution in 1538 , the abbey buildings were demolished within a few years ; although the main gatehouse , boundary walls and farm buildings were left standing . The last abbot , John Bouchier , was granted the substantial pension of £ 200 a year , when the abbey was dissolved : the largest in the Diocese of Lincoln . Payments did not continue for very long , however , as in 1552 , in the reign of Henry VIII 's son King Edward VI , the national finance 's were so poor that all pensions over £ 10 were suspended , with Bouchier recorded as having not received payments for over six months .

Following the Dissolution , during a period in which religion was rapidly changing in England , Bouchier managed to adapt his beliefs to stay within the hierarchy in the church : twice becoming a candidate for a bishopric , before servings as rector of Church Langton , from 1554 . This benefice may have represented his true religious sympathies as the rectory was under the patronage of " zealous Catholic " Edward Griffin of Dingley Hall ; although it also had financial incentive with a " wage " (income) of £ 60 a year : the highest in Leicestershire . Henry VIII had personally considered Bouchier for the position of Bishop of the King 's proposed new bishopric of Shrewsbury but the king then decided against the bishopric 's creation . In 1554 Bouchier was in touching distance of becoming a Bishop when he was suggested by Edward Griffin as a candidate for the Bishopric of Gloucester . Bouchier was even granted the income of the Bishopric in preparation for being formally appointed by Queen Mary . Mary , however , died , and Bouchier was never appointed . Mary was Catholic , where as her sister and successor , Queen Elizabeth was

Protestant ; Elizabeth therefore refused to appoint Mary 's favoured candidates for the 5 vacant bishoprics Mary had left . Bouchier may have gotten off lightly as two other candidates were arrested .

Bouchier felt unable to accept Queen Elizabeth 's Acts of Settlement and Uniformity , so whilst still serving as rector of Church Langton , he decided to lay low : A list , drawn up around 1569 , of pensioners of the Diocese of Lincoln lists him as " not known whether he lives or not " . This continued until 1570 , when his disobedience was noticed and he was deprived of the rectory . In June 1571 Bouchier sold the rights to his £ 200 a year pension to Sir Thomas Smyth for the sum of £ 900 , and quietly fled abroad , probably to France or Flanders . A wealthy , but very old man , wanted by the state as a " fugitive over the sea , contrary to statute " , Bouchier lived quietly abroad for his remaining years . His date and place of death is unknown , but he is thought to have lived until at least 1577 , when he would have been around 84 years old .

= = = Cavendish House = = =

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries , Henry VIII began to lease out his newly acquired land and property to extract an income from them . Leicester Abbey was granted in 1539 , on a 21 @-@ year lease , to Dr. Francis Cave , one of the commissioners who had negotiated the surrender of the abbey . During this period the abbey was rapidly demolished with the stone sold to meet the high demand within the town of Leicester .

War with France and Scotland led Henry VIII to sell of some of the religious establishments and land to raise finances quickly . Later , they were granted or bestowed to leading families who were friends or supporters of the King . These former religious establishments were frequently developed into country homes by their new aristocratic owners . Notable examples of this include Calke Abbey , Longleat House , Syon House , Welbeck Abbey. and Woburn Abbey .

Leicester Abbey followed a similar format : Dr. Cave 's tenancy was cut short in 1551 , when King Edward VI granted the abbey to William Parr , 1st Marquess of Northampton , brother of the former Queen Catherine Parr . Much of the abbey stone was then used to create a new mansion on the site , for the Marquess . The Marquess only held the abbey for two years : after supporting Lady Jane Grey 's claim to the throne , in 1553 , on the accession of Bloody Mary , he was arrested and his lands were confiscated . Mary granted the abbey and mansion to her catholic supporter Edward Hastings , 1st Baron Hastings of Loughborough , however he too fell from favour when Mary 's sister Elizabeth I came to the throne .

The abbey was sold to Henry Hastings , 3rd Earl of Huntingdon , in 1572 , and then to his brother , Sir Edward Hastings , in 1590 . It was Sir Edward who is through to have been the first of these owners to have actually lived at the abbey permanently : living in the gatehouse whilst the site was developed . Sir Edward 's son Henry (who inherited the abbey in 1603) sold it to in 1613 to William Cavendish , 1st Earl of Devonshire ; the mansion that had been built on the site thus became known as Cavendish House . The 1st Earl intended the abbey to be his main residence and so started to massively extend the mansion , with a new range added to the south and a large wing to the north . The family was massively wealthy with several other estates and stately homes ; following the death of the 1st Earl , the family decided to use Chatsworth House as their principle residence : Cavendish House thus was only used as a stopping point on the way to London . The house gained full @-@ time residency again in 1638 , however , when it was used as a Dower house by Christiana Cavendish (née Bruce) , widow of the 2nd Earl of Devonshire .

In 1645 , during the English Civil War , the house was used by King Charles I and the Royalist forces after they had besieging and captured Leicester . The house was looted and burned when the Royalist left and marched south towards Oxford ; meeting parliamentary forces at the Battle of Naseby . Cavendish House was never repaired .

The Cavendish family sold the abbey in 1733 , at which point , with Cavendish House in ruins , the precinct was being used as agricultural land . By the 19th century the abbey had come into the possession of the Earls of Dysart . Lionel Tollemache , 8th Earl of Dysart , sold the land east of the River Soar (known as Abbey Meadows) in 1876 ; this was to allow Leicester Town Council to

undertake flood prevention work . The part of this land between the river and the Grand Union Canal was developed by the Town Council into a public space known as Abbey Park , which was opened by King Edward VII (then Prince of Wales) in 1882 .

The remaining 32 acres (13 ha) of the abbey precinct , which included the abbey 's site and Cavendish House , were donated by William Tollemache , 9th Earl of Dysart , to Leicester Council in 1925 . Part of Cavendish House had to be demolished as it was found to be unsafe , however , nearly six @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half years later the area was opened to the public as part of Abbey Park .

= = Archaeological excavations = =

The first excavations of the abbey took place in the 17th century , when the Dowager Countess , Christiana Cavendish , instructed her gardener to search for the body of Cardinal Wolsey and relics from the abbey ; although little was found .

With no above ground remains , the exact location of the abbey had been lost , and so in the 1840s , the editor of the Leicester Chronicle , James Thompson , tried , and failed , to attempt to locate the abbey church . In the 1850s the Leicester Architectural and Archaeological Society would also carry out excavations , but also failed to locate the abbey . Prior to the 9th Earl of Dysart 's donation of the abbey precinct , another attempt was undertaken , but again , no trace of the abbey was found .

In the interim period between the donation of the land in 1925 and opening of the abbey park , the abbey was the subject of numerous archaeological excavations , which continued into the following decade . By 1930 the abbey church , and many of its associated buildings had been finally located , and it was decided (by the architect in charge of designing the new public park , William Bedingfield) that the site of the abbey should be laid out with low stone walls . As the abbey 's stone was " robbed " , all that remained of many of the buildings were trenches : the remains of the former foundations . These trenches were " not always recognised " by the first excavators , which meant the layout of areas such as the chapter house , dormitory and kitchens was not clear .

In 2002 the University of Leicester Archaeological Services decided to excavate the presumed location of the abbey 's kitchens , to clarify the layout of that area of the abbey . These first excavations located both the north and south walls and a 15th ? 16th @-@ century brick oven , confirming that it was indeed the kitchens . The area excavated was enlarged in 2003 , with the south @-@ west corner of the building and a second oven uncovered : this corner had not been entirely robbed of stone , with two courses of sandstone remaining . The second oven was found to contain charcoal , fragments of wheat and barley , fish @-@ bones and hazelnuts . A drain identified in the 1930s excavation was also located , and found to contain small bones , fish @-@ scales , and the bones of rats who had formerly lived in the drain .

This excavation confirmed the kitchen was a square building measuring 11 @.@ 88 metres (39 @.@ 0 ft) square , with walls of between 1 @.@ 32 metres (4 ft 4 in) and 1 @.@ 74 metres (5 ft 9 in) thick . The ovens found in the corners of the room suggest the room was an octagonal shape internally : similar to the kitchens found at Glastonbury Abbey .

From 2000 until 2008 , the abbey ruins were used for training excavations for archaeology students at the School of Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of Leicester .

= = Layout = =

The archaeological excavations undertaken have allowed historians to calculate the layout and plan of the abbey : which were then plotted out with low stone walls , during the 1920s and 1930s . The abbey church was built on an artificially raised piece of land and is thought to have been richly decorated . It featured a tower at the west end , under which was the main entrance to the church ; two large transepts , which extended beyond the church 's aisles ; and large secondary side chapels , situated either beside the chancel , at the east @-@ end of the church .

The cloister lay to the south of the abbey church and was flanked by three ranges of building . The west range contained the " lavatorium " , a room used for washing ; a vaulted undercroft , used for

storage ; and , on the first floor , the abbey 's best residential accommodation , probably including that used by the Abbot . The East range contained the abbey 's chapterhouse ; a small room which is presumed to be either a library or a sacristy ; a second larger undercroft , again used for storage ; a corridor , known as the Slype , leading to the graveyard ; and on the first floor were the canon 's dormitory and reredorter (communal latrine) . The south range contained a further undercroft ; a warming house , containing a large fire for the residents to warm themselves by ; and to the first floor the refectory , where the brethren ate .

To the south of the cloisters lay another three ranges of buildings which were formed around cobbled courtyard . The western range of this courtyard contained the abbey 's kitchens . South @-@ east of this courtyard was a large , separate , rectangular building with a small projection facing north : this building is believed to have been the " guest hall " , with the projection explained as an oriel window .

The abbey sat within a large walled precinct . The original precinct walls were constructed of sandstone in the 13th century , and featured both projecting corner towers , and smaller interval towers along its length . Much of this original wall was demolished when the enclosure was enlarged to the south around the turn of the 16th century . This work was thought to have been done under Abbot John Penny and what remains of the wall is now known as " Abbot Penny 's Wall " . This new wall was built using red brick , rather than stone , and is decorated by forty @-@ four different patterns or symbols , which include heraldic devices , simple patterns , and religious symbols , all of which were built into the wall using black bricks .

The abbey precinct was entered through an outer gateway on the north wall of the precinct . This led to a " halt @-@ way " which was around 60 metres (200 ft) long , and was flanked either side by stone walls ; it was enclosed at the south end by the abbey 's formal Gatehouse . The original gatehouse was a single storey construction of two lodges flanking the gate ; but this was subsequently enlarged . The new gatehouse measured 21 metres (69 ft) by 8 @.@ 5 metres (28 ft) : it had round turrets at each corner , thought to contain stairs , and had " a couple of storeys " built above the gate itself . The gatehouse was then flanked to the west by what is thought to be a small , second kitchen .

On the eastern side of the precinct lay the abbey 's infirmary : a hospital used to care for ill or elderly canons . The infirmary was made up of two large buildings : one a chapel ; the other a hall (with latrines to one end) serving as a ward . The abbey precinct also contained an almonry , where poor boys received a free education in a type of boarding school ; a water mill ; a dovecote ; and a fishpond .

= = Possessions = =

= = = Controlled churches = = =

= = = = Churches in Leicestershire = = = =

= = = = Churches outside Leicestershire = = = =

= = = = Monastic cells = = = =

Cockerham Priory , Lancashire

= = = Manors and land = = =

= = List of abbots = =

A list of abbots of the abbey :