

Wymondham Abbey Resources

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Who founded Wymondham Abbey?



The monastery at Wymondham was founded nine hundred years ago, in 1107. The founder, William d'Albini was a local landowner whose grandfather fought for William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The family took their name from their home town, St. Martin d'Aubigny on the Cherbourg peninsula of Normandy. William owned land in the Wymondham area, including the castle at New Buckenham. However, he probably rarely visited Wymondham, as he had important duties at the royal court as Chief Butler (*Pincerna Regis*) to King Henry I (1100 – 1135) *left*. The title “chief butler” did not mean that he actually waited at table; it was more an honorary title for a senior official – a sort of cabinet minister in today’s terms. The d'Albini (sometimes known by the French form, d'Aubigny) family were certainly influential and powerful. William d'Albini's son, also called William, married into royalty when he married widow of Henry I. He became Earl of Sussex, or Earl of Arundel, with the family headquarters at Arundel Castle, now the seat of the Duke of Norfolk.

2. Why found a monastery?

Medieval people believed that when they died, their souls did not go straight to heaven but first had to endure punishment in purgatory for all the sins they had committed during their lives. The main work of monks, however, was to pray. This was known as *Opus Dei*, or the work of God. The monks' prayers would help to speed the souls of the departed to heaven – and because a monastery was intended to be a permanent organisation lasting for ever, it guaranteed that the founder and his family and descendants would always benefit from their prayers. William d'Albini, his wife and immediate descendants were all buried immediately in front of the high altar – the very focal point of prayer offered in the Abbey.

3. Why choose Wymondham?

Probably because d'Albini owned land, and had a house, here. The location was a good one, about half way between the important towns (both with Norman castles) of Norwich and Thetford. The River Tiffey provided the site with water and drainage. It seems likely that at that time the Tiffey was navigable for small boats as far as Wymondham, making it easy to transport large quantities of stone to the site. There was already a Saxon church on the site (its foundations were found during a recent archaeological survey). This was probably a church of some size and importance, as the parish it served was the largest in the county. William's new monastery church, however, replaced it on a far grander scale. From the start, it was intended that the monks and the townspeople should share the same church – a slightly unusual arrangement, and one that was to cause many disputes later in its history. There were occasional outbreaks of lawlessness (once, the townspeople even imprisoned the abbot in a tower!), though for most of its history relations were peaceful and cordial enough. Ultimately the two parts were sectioned off by solid walls, and only the people's part survived the dissolution of the monastery in 1538.

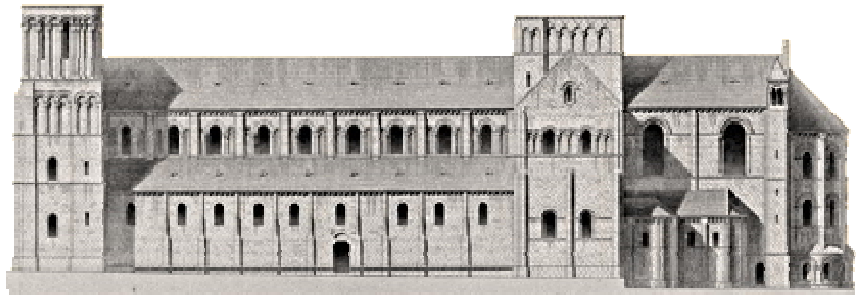
4. What sort of monastery was Wymondham?

Wymondham was quite a small house with initially twelve Benedictine monks (also called Black Monks from the colour of their robes) who followed the Rule of St. Benedict. When founded, the monastery was not an abbey, but a priory. This meant that it was a daughter house of another larger monastery, St. Albans Abbey, where the founder's uncle Richard was abbot. The prior of Wymondham was chosen by the monks of St. Albans, an arrangement which in due course became another source of friction. Like other monasteries, Wymondham's income came principally from the land and estates with which it was endowed by the d'Albini family and later benefactors. Some estates were farmed directly by the monks' employees, others paid rent in cash or in kind – such as the 200 eels per annum paid by tenants from Hilgay in the fens. The Wymondham monks owned lands all over Norfolk. During over 400 years of history, the monastery grew in wealth and importance, and in 1448 the Pope finally granted Wymondham independence from St. Albans, thus becoming Wymondham Abbey.

5. How was the church built?

There is no good building stone in Norfolk, though plenty of flint rubble is available to fill in the pillars (which are like hollow stone tubes) and construct walls which require less strength.

Most of the facing stone used at Wymondham (as also in the



construction of Norwich Cathedral) was imported from quarries near Caen in Normandy. Though much further in distance than quarries in the Midlands of England, it was probably easier and cheaper to bring stone from Normandy as it required less overland transport. In every detail, this is a Norman church. Most of the detailed stone carving, such as the mouldings of the pillars, was done near the quarries in Normandy to avoid having to carry any more weight than strictly necessary. Essentially, the church was bought from Normandy in kit form, then reassembled on site here. Originally it looked very much like churches of the same period in Normandy, such as La Trinité, Caen above. The church was the first part of the monastery to be built, with the monks living initially in the founder's house nearby. Building work started at the east end and was directed from the mason's lodge by the master mason – one was named Robertus Cementarius (Bob the Builder). The builders (professional masons, carpenters, joiners, glaziers, etc., not the monks themselves) had tools very similar to those used by modern builders, with pulleys and wooden scaffolding. The church took about thirty years to complete, with a central tower and two short towers at the west end. It bears a striking similarity to abbey churches in Normandy.

6. How big was the monastery and how did it change?

What survives today is only about half of the church – 70 metres of an original 140 metre length) – and a few ruined remains of the other buildings, such as the east tower and the arch of the chapter house, where the monks once held their daily meetings. The foundations of the other buildings survive beneath the Abbey Meadow to the south of the church. The artist's impression shows what the whole monastery complex may have looked like in the years just before the dissolution in 1538. Buildings included the monks' dormitory, the refectory and kitchens, infirmary (for sick monks) and abbot's house, as well as offices, stables, gardens and even fish ponds. Monks ate a lot of fish!



The earliest part of the surviving building is the nave. It is in the Norman style of architecture, with decorated round-headed arches. Originally there were two short towers at the west end, and the surviving western pillars formed the bases of these. However, like most churches, Wymondham was enlarged and updated in later centuries. In the 1300s, the north aisle was widened, and a century later had a fine new roof added. The whole church was originally cross-shaped, with a central tower which



became unsafe in the mid-1300s. This was replaced from 1376 with the octagonal east tower (a fashionable feature at the time), which is also when the solid wall was built to separate the monks' east end from the people's nave. The nave height was raised in the 1440s, and a magnificent "angel roof" added. In 1445, following disputes about where the monastery and town bells could hang, a prominent local landowner raised money to replace the original Norman west towers with the single massive tower we see today. The original conveyance for the land still survives in the Abbey muniment room over the porch. The townspeople's bells were hung in the new (but never completely finished) tower, calling people to rise, to work and to pray.

Changes in later centuries included the squaring off of some of the chancel and nave pillars (in the 1570s and 1580s, partly funded by Queen Elizabeth I, who visited in 1573), the addition of the organ (1793) and gallery (1903) and the construction of the gilded screen behind the altar (1919-34).