Thetford Priory: the Unpublished Documents of the Office of Works

Jackie Hall

The priory of St Mary, Thetford was one of the foremost Cluniac houses in England, made famous from its foundation up to the Suppression by its association with the earls and dukes of Norfolk. During the course of a current research project on the tombs of the Howard dukes of Norfolk, led by Phillip Lindley, all the relevant Ministry of Works documentation, either in the care of English Heritage Archives or accessioned by the English Heritage curatorial team, was examined.¹ This paper reveals four different types of discovery relating to the buildings and archaeology, and concludes by considering the value of the exercise.

THE DOCUMENTS

The church and claustral buildings of Thetford Priory (Figs 1 and 2) were acquired by the Crown in 1930 and came into formal guardianship in 1933. Within a year clearance excavations had begun, continuing into early 1939, and then again in the late 1940s and 1950s. As was usual, excavations stopped at the highest medieval floor level. This activity generated many documents of different varieties. By modern standards, very few photographs survive. However, those which do include photographs showing the pre-guardianship condition of the site, and a handful of great value taken during excavations in 1939 and 1956.² Similarly, there are only a few drawings showing now-lost or reburied features.³ None of these have been previously published.⁴ Of equal importance are the original finds sheets of the 1930s clearance,⁵ even though it has only been possible to identify about 20% of the finds in the current English Heritage collection.

A central document is the hand-corrected typescript (33 pages) of a guidebook intended for publication in 1939, believed to have been written by P K Baillie-Reynolds, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and F J E Raby, Assistant Secretary in the Office of Works; it contains a summary history and lengthy architectural analysis.⁶ Publication was delayed by war and, in the event, only a drastically abridged version (6 pages) was ever published; this was slightly enlarged in 1979 and reprinted in 1984.⁷ Additional to this draft are the transcripts of two papers read to the Society of Antiquaries. The first, written by Baillie-Reynolds, was read on 31 January 1936 by William Ormsby-Gore (later Lord Harlech), First Commissioner of the Ministry of Works.⁸ This was shortly after the astonishing discovery in the previous summer of numerous pieces of high-class Renaissance sculpture, closely matching that of the tombs of the 3rd Howard duke and his son-in-law, the Duke of Richmond, at Framlingham church.⁹ The second paper, also written by Baillie-Reynolds, was read by him on 25 November 1948, an occasion which had been delayed by the war.¹⁰ By this time most of the site had been cleared and consolidated, and this paper concentrated on the description and development of the church and claustral buildings.

Together these documents throw light not just on the architecture but on archaeological discoveries made during the clearance excavations (most only known for the first time now), on aspects of the subsequent consolidation programme, and on the condition of the monument then and now.

THE AUTHORs

Paul Baillie-Reynolds and Frederic Raby were both officials in the Office of Works. Baillie-Reynolds (1896–1973) was a career archaeologist and Romanist, joining the Office in 1934 as Inspector of Ancient Monuments; during the Second World War, he was one of the ‘Monuments Men’, rescuing works of art and archives from destruction.¹¹ From 1954 to 1961
Fig. 2. Phased plan of the priory, made in 1970 but clearly reflecting the architectural analysis of the 1930s. Crown copyright (NMR).
he was Chief Inspector, and thus responsible for
the excavation, understanding and preservation
of many sites; he authored numerous blue guides.
Raby (1888–1966) was a historian and Latinist,
publishing key volumes of medieval Latin verse
throughout his life. He was an administrative
civil servant within the Office from 1911 to 1948,
rising to Assistant Secretary, and, unusually for
someone in his position, he authored many blue
guides.
By contrast, William Ormsby-Gore
(1885–1964), 4th Baron Harlech from 1948, was
a career politician. At first sight it is surprising to
find that, as First Commissioner of Works
between 1931 and 1936, he took such an active
role as giving talks to the Society of Antiquaries,
and authoring three volumes of Guides to the
Ancient Monuments of England. However, he had
already published on Florentine sculptors, and
was a trustee of the National Gallery (1927–34
and 1936–41), the Tate Gallery (1933–38), and
the British Museum (1937–47), a member of the
Arts Council (1946–48), Chairman of the
Advisory Council of the Victoria and Albert
Museum, of the Ancient Monuments Board, and
of the Governing Body of the School of Oriental
and African Studies, and President of the
National Museum of Wales.

THE PRIORY
The Priory of St Mary was founded by Roger
Bigod in 1103 or 1104 for monks of the order of
Cluny, and was first colonized from Lewes
Priory. It originally occupied the church of
St Mary in the town of Thetford, but moved
across the river Little Ouse for more space a few
years later. The construction of the monastic
buildings continued over many years; even the
claustral ranges were not complete until about
1200. Building works were more or less
continuous throughout the life of the monastery,
including, for instance, a lady chapel on the
north side of the church, erected in the 13th
century; a remodelling of the chapter house in
the 14th century; and general updating in the
15th century, with new cloister alleys, a new
infirmary and many changes within the church.
The Bigod family line died out in 1306, and the
14th century was a difficult one for the priory,
with frequent royal exactions and indifferent
patrons. The patronage (along with the Norfolk
patrimony) eventually passed to Thomas
Mowbray in 1397. The Mowbrays took more
interest in their Cluniac priory, as did their
successors to the earldom (soon to be the
dukedom) of Norfolk, the Howards. Numerous
Howards were buried in Thetford Priory church
at a period when many other works, including a
new east window, were being carried out
throughout the building complex.
From 1535 Henry VIII’s visitors descended on
the priory. The Duke of Norfolk petitioned the
King to convert it either into a parish church, on
the basis that Henry VIII’s natural son, the Duke
of Richmond, was buried there and that he had
already had made two tombs, ‘one for the said
Duke of Richemond and an other for himself,
which have already and will cost hym, or they
can be fully set uppe & fynished, iiiij’ li at the
least’. The petition was refused, however, and
the priory was eventually suppressed in February
1540.

The records of the Ministry of Works throw light
on all periods of the monastery, especially those
relating to the last phase, as we can now see.
They reveal lost archaeology; document
reconstruction, consolidation and deterioration;
and record early views on the architectural
development of the priory.

LOST AND FOUND
Records of foundations, floors, and even of
otherwise unknown walls and burials add to our
knowledge of the site. Intriguingly, aside from
the finds sheets, most of this extra knowledge is
concentrated to the north of the church, and in
the northern half of the church, especially from
the nave north aisle chapel to the lady chapel,
one of the most liturgically important areas of the
late medieval priory. There were also major
archaeological discoveries in the claustral
buildings at the south side of the priory;
archaeology which has since been destroyed.

Burials north of the lady chapel
Most dramatically, a 1936 plan (and nothing
else) shows the excavation, probably in the
previous year, of a small structure north of the
lady chapel, which revealed parts of four coffined
burials that clearly predate the structure
(Fig. 3). It is presumed that they were left
in situ; the anthropoid shape suggests stone cists
rather than monolithic coffins, although this is
The burials are even more misaligned with the priory church than with the little building above, and a late Anglo-Saxon origin should not be ruled out, given the status of the town in that period and the frequent discovery of Anglo-Saxon burials across Thetford.

The structure above the burials, which is no longer visible, is labelled as a vault, suggesting a late medieval burial vault, although there are no records of bodies associated with it. Alternatively, it might have been a medieval charnel chapel. However, its subsequent destruction or burial by the Ministry of Works suggests that the structure was thought to be post-medieval, as we know that other post-medieval features were destroyed, doubtless in favour of presenting a purely medieval monument to the public.

Renaissance tomb fragments
Better known is the discovery of the internationally significant Renaissance sculptured fragments, similar to the tombs which were subsequently reassembled for the Norfolk family in Framlingham church, and clearly associated with those mentioned in Howard’s letter to Henry VIII (see above). Since their excavation in June and July 1935, they have always been recorded as having been found in the ‘sacristy’, as it also says on the contemporary finds sheets.

At Thetford, this does not mean the room adjoining the south transept (although this certainly was a sacristy) but the rooms north of the north transept. They are identified as such in a document detailing a corrody for Peter Nobis, Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, made in 1512. As well as annual payment, stabling, and access to the garden, the corrody included two ‘loft chambers’, namely a bed chamber and a study in ‘oon howse namyd the Sacrystye, being next adjoynaunte to the northe crosse ile of the cherche’. It is not clear whether the building was still in use as a sacristy by the time of the corrody and, in any event, it is likely that in this location it was the sacrist’s office rather than a room for storing liturgical books, robes and plate. The draft guidebook is the only place where the finds spot is further refined, since it tells us that the fragments were found ‘in the southernmost room’. Since the sacrist was responsible for works on the church (except in some large religious houses where there was a separate master of works, at least in the later middle ages), a room associated with him would have been a particularly suitable place to store two of the finest sculptural tombs of the age, immediately prior to their intended erection.

The lady chapel
Two features were discovered in the lady chapel, which have since been covered over. One was the first west wall, north of the old apsidal choir aisle, as shown on the plan (Fig. 2). The draft guidebook confirms that these foundations ‘exist below ground’, and are not hypothetical. This substantiates the idea of a two-phase structure better than any other evidence, a matter of some importance given that the chapel, along with the sacristy and north transept, deserves much closer attention as connected spaces of liturgical and patronal significance. Also in the lady chapel ‘there are considerable remains of paving of slabs of stone with bands of tiles between. The stone has perished to such an extent that it is not possible to expose this floor, but the arrangement of it is marked on the plan’. Fortunately, in this instance, there is a photographic record of it (Figs 4 and 5).
Fig. 4. Lady chapel, looking east and showing original floor at west end, c.1939. Crown copyright (NMR).

Fig. 5. Lady chapel, looking south into presbytery and showing original floor at west end, 1954. Crown copyright (NMR).
The draft guidebook records that ‘the floor level of the apse was raised concealing the bases of the arcade and the curve of the apse was cut roughly square above the new level. This later floor has been removed save for a small piece in a recess on the south side’. This is our only knowledge of this late medieval alteration, although it fits well with what is happening in the rest of the church.

Chapel off the nave north aisle
A grave at the centre of this chapel was excavated on 24 October 1935, when a single nail was recorded from it, apparently the sole find. The bones cannot now be located in the English Heritage collections and it is possible they were left in the grave, or even moved after the Suppression. The guidebook draft describes the grave as being brick-lined, but this is not clear from the single surviving photograph (Fig. 6). It was believed to be the grave of John, the 1st Howard duke, who died on the wrong side at the Battle of Bosworth, a hypothesis that remains likely, although no contemporary document mentions it. The chapel was covered with a fan vault, and closed off with a painted and gilded screen, both discovered by Henry Harrod in his excavations of 1849. By a miracle, some of these architectural fragments can be identified in the English Heritage collections (Fig. 8).

The presbytery
The presbytery was the focus of intense activity (Fig. 9), with finds recorded in 1934, 1935 and 1937 (Fig. 10). Analysis of the finds sheets forms part of the wider project. The earliest discovered finds, 176 of them, in December 1934 and March 1935, from around the top of the tomb, included
'carved images', pieces of effigy ('Leg and Ankle') and 'Tree Roots in Masonry' (Fig. 11). Figures sitting on a bench with open books are clearly identified in Ormsby-Gore's paper for the Antiquaries in January 1936. In 1937 the vault at the centre of the presbytery was excavated. It was undoubtedly for Thomas, the 2nd Howard duke, hero of Flodden Field, who died in 1524, and whose funeral, celebrated with enormous pomp, lasted two days. Over 500 items were retrieved from the interior of the vault, and over 400 from around the edges of it; 29% of these have been positively identified in the current English Heritage collections. The vault is no longer open to the public (and is filled with sand) but a cross-section drawing was made in 1938 (Fig. 12), and a 1939 photograph survives, which shows the interior after a reinforced concrete slab was placed on top. The draft guidebook further described the vault as having a narrow passage on the north side, with recesses on the south for the coffins of the duke himself and of his duchess, although she was never buried there. No bodies were found in 1937, confirming the historical accounts of the dowager duchess removing her husband’s body to Lambeth parish church, where she was also buried.

Fig. 8 (left). Fragment of fan vault, believed to have been found in chapel north of nave. Jackie Hall.

Fig. 9. Excavating the presbytery in 1934, looking east. NMAS: Ancient House, Thetford.
From cloister to infirmary

Other items recorded from the 1930s to the 1950s, but no longer visible, include considerable remains of tile and brick flooring in the slype and the infirmary passage[32] and a late Anglo-Saxon interlace grave cover found in the infirmary south range.[33] Also in the infirmary, ‘daub’ partitions survived to a considerable height until uncovered in 1951 (Fig. 13).[34]

Late works in latrine building

Unusually, a good series of photographs survives from the clearance excavations made in 1939, and these show two significant lost features (Fig. 14). In the first place, the north wall of the latrine block once stood much higher, with the upper parts clearly in a different build from the lower, suggesting a post-medieval use enclosing a garden or yard. All of this upper section was taken back to the medieval walling. The second major feature was a broad late medieval or post-medieval brick-lined and flag-bottomed drain which ran north-south across the latrine building and across the main drain as well. This was clearly built after the main drain had substantially silted up. Although this might seem indicative of post-monastic use, the lower numbers of monks in the late Middle Ages, possibly each with a private apartment and
Latrine could make disuse of the main drain plausible. Only a single find (a ‘book label’) was recorded from the excavations in this area.35

OLD AND NEW
The draft guidebook carefully records significant replastering, rebuilding of features, and even the recreation of some structures. Although the Ministry of Works were careful about what they did, this shows that the architectural historian must look at the buildings now with a careful eye — things are not necessarily as they seem. Some of the major interventions are listed here.

Replacing chalk with harder limestone
The fragmentary chalk base of the nave altar was rebuilt in harder stone (from the Lincolnshire limestone), since the chalk would not have withstood exposure to the weather.36 The same is also true of the remains of the choir screen walls.

Fig. 12. Cross-section of 1524 vault taken from 1938 design for concrete cover. For many years it was possible to go down and view the vault, but it is now filled with sand. © English Heritage.

Fig. 13. View during excavation of infirmary in 1951, showing wall collapsed towards infirmary cloister with plaster still adhering to wall face. Crown copyright (NMR).
(though not the floor of the passage through it); the high altar; the altars of the south transept chapels (only the base of the apsidal chapel was uncovered, but a substantial height was rebuilt); and the oven in the ‘sacristy’ north of the north transept (though the brick interior was untouched).37

Replacing chalk with flint
Although not specifically mentioned in the draft guide, it is clear that the wall tops, and in places the wall faces, have been covered in flint, no doubt once again to protect chalk, this time in the wall core, from decay.

Rebuilding architectural features
At the east end of the presbytery, the east end of the lady chapel, and the east end of the nave north chapel, the altar steps were reconstructed, partially based on surviving evidence.38 More drastically, the arch of the presbytery south aisle window was reconstructed in 1937 ‘to give some very necessary support to the high-standing pier of the main apse’ (Figs 15 and 16).39 The reconstruction was based on a 1738 engraving made by the Buck brothers (Fig. 17). Unfortunately, Samuel and Nathaniel Buck are not known for their accuracy, and it is difficult to confirm whether the feature they drew really is in the east end of the south choir aisle.

The south wall of the nave/north wall of the cloister, which revets the platform on which the church stands, is entirely modern.40 In the western range, the stairs from the outer parlour leading south were reconstructed.41

New plaster
Uncovering the priory demonstrated that all the buildings were plastered internally, with significant survival. Most of this was renewed in order to protect chalk interior faces from the weather. Areas replastered included the north wall of the crossing; the chapter-house walls and bench; the understairs cupboard opening into the slype; the recess in the south range east room; the walls of the west range (though much of the topcoat here has since fallen).42

EXPOSURE
Comparison of 1930s photographs with modern photographs shows how much has deteriorated from exposure in the last 70 years, and how good, for instance, the survival of vulnerable material such as wall plaster was when it was...
Fig. 15. East end of church, looking south-east in 1930. Crown copyright (NMR).

Fig. 16. The church, looking east, with the nave altar in the foreground and the high altar, raised on steps, in the middle distance. Both altars have been rebuilt and the steps are a reconstruction. Tom Arbour.
revealed for the first time in hundreds of years. Although this was no doubt true throughout the priory, the scant photographic record means that only a few examples can be identified today.

The nave north chapel
Figure 6 shows the exceptional survival of the wall benches and other features on their first exposure after perhaps hundreds of years, and is a stark contrast with their condition today (Fig. 7). The brick lining of a recess behind the altar has also been lost since then.

North transept apsidal chapel
Although still in reasonable condition, a 1949 photograph shows how much the condition, especially of the wall plaster, has deteriorated since then (Figs 18 and 19).

Lady chapel floor
This has already been referred to as one of the, now hidden, archaeological discoveries, recorded photographically in 1939 (Fig. 4). A further photograph made in 1954 shows how far that floor had been damaged from the exposure of only 15 years (Fig. 5). Clearly, it was not covered up as planned, and mentioned in the draft guidebook, in 1939 — perhaps because of the outbreak of war — but this presumably happened in the 1950s.
ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS
Detailed architectural analysis is the main point of the lengthy draft guidebook, and the authors had the advantage of seeing features as they emerged in good, unconsolidated condition from the ground. The discussion is lengthy and dry, and does not always conform to modern architectural-historical language or our current understanding of medieval monastic buildings or architectural styles; a summary of its interpretation can be seen in the phasing shown in Figure 2. However, as with many of the old blue guides, it remains a useful starting point for looking at the buildings afresh, with some valuable analysis that should not be ignored, even if it should be critically reappraised. Only one example of its usefulness is given here.

The west end of the lady chapel
The draft guidebook accurately describes and analyses the complex block of masonry at the west end of the lady chapel (Figs 2 and 20). The north wall of the north choir aisle was cut back, but a long stub was left that ‘was encased with moulded ashlar’, part of which survives on both sides, that on the north side abutting the apsidal chapel of the north transept. Although Raby and Baillie-Reynolds did not go much beyond this, recognizing the structural arrangements in this early phase of the lady chapel can point to this area at the west end being deliberately framed to create a huge elaborated alcove. This could be related to the well-known stories of a miraculous statue of Mary and, at the very least, it says something about the liturgical arrangements of the lady chapel. By the 15th or 16th century, however, the alcove was no longer considered necessary and it was blocked in order to create a spiral stair leading to a new gallery at the west end of the chapel.

CONCLUSION
Although the architectural analysis is useful, the greater value lies in the records of the clearance excavations; the (usually inadvertent) records of condition; and the notices of consolidation.

The clearance excavations revealed many features that have since been either covered over again, or actually destroyed. While these mainly relate to the late phases of the priory and the

Fig. 19. North transept apsidal chapel at present. Jackie Hall.
post-Dissolution period, some, such as the burials north of the lady chapel, may be rather earlier. The early photographs also show us the extent of deterioration of parts of the priory in the last 60 to 70 years, which could help formulate future conservation policy. The conservation policy of the 1930s–50s is also apparent. With its wholesale replacement of exposed chalk with either flint or hard limestone, and comprehensive replastering of interior wall faces (mainly chalk again), this might to modern eyes appear drastically interventionist. Without question, however, it is this policy that has kept the buildings standing for so long.

In summary, I hope that the value of the 1930s–50s documents has been demonstrated, and thereby the value of archiving them. They stand as a testament to the dedicated scholars who produced them.

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NOTES

1 'Representing Re-Formation' was funded by the Science and Heritage programme of the AHRC and EPSRC.
3 EH Archives, MP 311P.
5 English Heritage (hereafter EH), acc. no. 88107135. These are the subject of much more detailed discussion in Hall, in prep.
6 EH, acc. no. 88107151. The authors are not named on the draft, but are assumed to be the same as the abridged version.
8 EH, acc. no. 88107150.
9 This was the inception of a train of research on the Framlingham tombs, and their relation to the Thetford fragments, starting with Lawrence Stone and Howard Colvin, ‘The Howard tombs at Framlingham, Suffolk’, The Archaeological Journal, CXXII, 1965, 159–71, followed by Richard Marks, ‘The Howard tombs at Thetford and Framlingham: new discoveries’, The Archaeological Journal, CXL,
Jackie Hall was the archaeologist and project manager on the ‘Representing Re-Formation’ project at the University of Leicester. She also works as a consultant and is the Peterborough Cathedral Archaeologist.