

HIGHAM PRIORY

By A. F. ALLEN

IN June, 1959 two cottages at Higham which formed part of an eighteenth century farmhouse known as Abbey Farm, situated near the old Church of St. Mary's on the edge of the North Kent marshes, were demolished, the cottages having been condemned as unfit for habitation by the local Rural District Council. The site is traditionally that of Higham Priory and these cottages contained considerable portions of medieval masonry. It was therefore very fortunate that the demolition came to the knowledge of Mr. D. Spittle of the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments. He was present on the site for part of the period of demolition and has kindly permitted me to use his report and photographs.

Examining the remains as they were demolished he observes: (footnotes mine).

'The part of the building in question, now demolished, belonged to the late fourteenth century and may have formed the west range of the priory buildings. The present later buildings at right angles and at the southern end¹ may indicate the line of other buildings belonging to the priory. However there was no indication of a corresponding range at the northern end ever having existed.² The range may have been divided by a crosswall on the site of the present later chimney stack, as the cellar to the south of the stack has medieval stone walls throughout and in fact supports the stack. In the sixteenth century the western wall was replaced by a timber framed wall, presumably when the priory was dissolved. At this time the chimney stack was inserted and part of the range on the East side built. In the eighteenth century this latter range was heightened and refaced in brick, and another block built on the south side.

MATERIALS

'Squared limestone, clunch, knapped flints, timber framing and brick. Roofs, tiled or slated. In many places the bands of clunch

¹ These remain as a cottage with outbuildings which it is understood will not be demolished at present.

² See later observations on the site generally.

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alternated with deep bands of flints as in the Church.³ The core of the wall was mostly clunch with field flints.

DESCRIPTION

The early range measured about 53 ft. 0 in. N. and S. × 16 ft. 6 in. E. and W. At the time of the visit the East wall stood to a maximum height of 16 ft. 0 in., the North wall to 7 ft. 0 in., and the West wall to 2 ft. 0 in. The South wall and the southern end of the East wall formed part of the later house⁴—except for the cellar but appeared to be built entirely of later material. The East wall was 3 ft. 0 in. thick at ground floor level and 2 ft. 9 in. at first floor level and above. The North and West walls were both thinner than the eastern.

The East wall: The exterior face of the wall contained no early features or openings although the wall itself consisted largely of bands of clunch and knapped flint. There was considerable patching in brick.⁵ The western face of the wall contained a number of recesses and blocked openings. At the northern end was an inserted recess having at the sides re-used limestone mouldings consisting of moulded shafts enriched with tabernacle work and painted mostly in red and gold, small areas of which survive. On a loose fragment and on the side of one of the shafts was the painting of a feathered wing in gold outlined in black. The small scale of the moulding suggests that the fragments came from a tomb recess or a reredos, etc., and is probably late fourteenth century in date. In the wall immediately below this recess and possibly forming part of the sill were two fragments of a late thirteenth century or early fourteenth century purbeck marble tomb slab. One long side remains having been hacked off the main part and bears the following inscription in Lombardic capitals:

OVS: QI: PASSET: VOYLET: PRIER: QE: DEV: ALAV⁶

Traces of bitumen were found in the indents. Below this sill again was a wide recess lined at the back with re-used ashlar but later blocked flush with the wall face. The purpose and date of the recess was not determined, but was probably post dissolution. Above these recesses and a little to the south was a large plain quadrant shaped corbel (fourteenth century?) doubtless to take floor joists. Above again were two rebated jambs of an opening now blocked which was probably originally a large sixteenth century window. At ground floor level and slightly to the north

³ Higham Church 100 yards to the west of the site.

⁴ The surviving cottage which is of early nineteenth century construction.

⁵ See Plate IA & IB of east wall of cottages numbers 1 and 2.

⁶ See Plate IIA.

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of the above, was a late fourteenth century doorway with the internal head and jambs having a bold double wave moulding,⁷ The arch which was slightly shouldered had a relieving arch. The

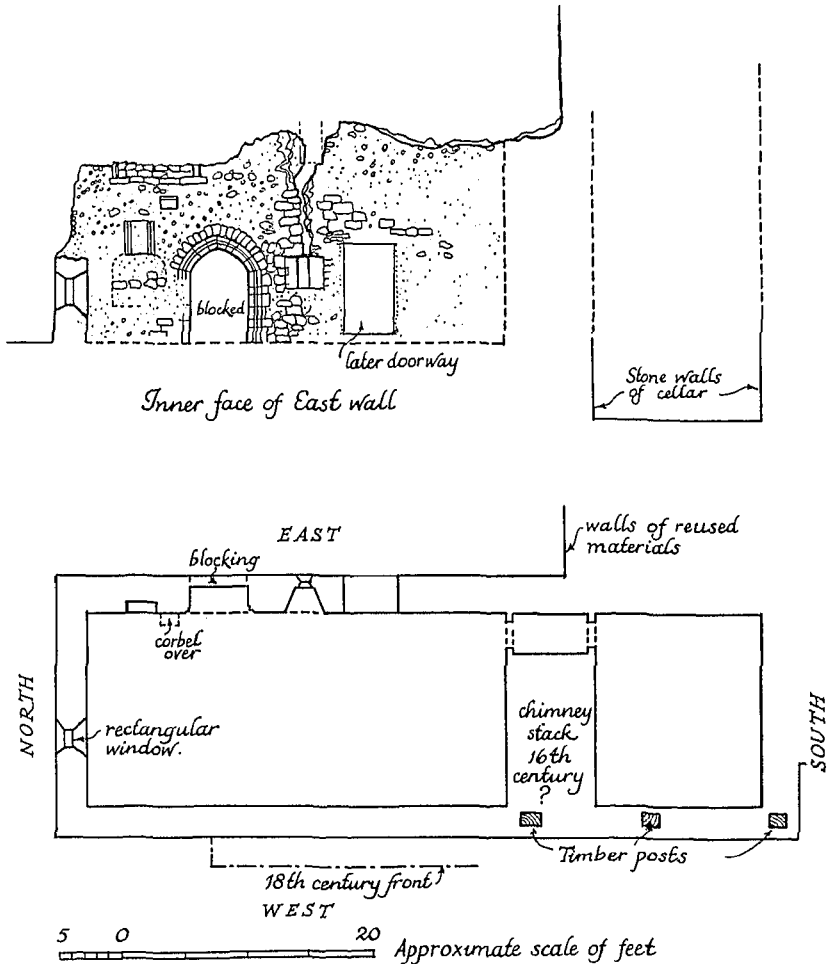


Fig. 1.

external jambs were masked by later blocking but it seems that they were not moulded. The northern internal jamb was partly renewed by brickwork. To the south were the remains of a small window with splayed window jambs. The head was destroyed. It is said that in the upper part of this wall there were three narrow

⁷ See Plate IIB, and fig. 1.



A. General view of cottages on east side showing the N-S wall on right and E-W part with outbuildings on left.



B. East wall of cottage showing medieval masonry and blocked doorway.



A. Fragments of purbeck marble tomb slab taken from East wall.



B. 14th century doorway taken from inside demolished cottage.

pointed headed windows but these had been destroyed at the time of visiting. At the southern end of the range was a cellar constructed in clunch, well coursed and probably medieval. In the south eastern angle is an entry into a tunnel like cellar, probably a large drain or an entry to further cellars to the south.⁸

The Northern wall contained a small late medieval square headed window at ground floor level drilled to take bars but not grooved for glass. Above it, it is said, a small pointed window existed. The West wall had no features visible or surviving at its northern end, but in the southern part, approximately coinciding with the cellar were three large posts of a timber framed structure. They had enlarged heads and rose from the earlier foundations to the full height of the building. At first floor level was a horizontal member from which sprung a stout curved strut onto the middle post. Timbers removed from the building were chamfered with bracket stops and appeared to be of the sixteenth century.

'The chimney stack contained at first floor level a partly blocked sixteenth century stone surrounded fireplace with moulded stone jambs and stops and a chamfered bressumer.'

All these very interesting observations were made by Mr. Spittle in the unhelpful surroundings of a demolition, and local historians should be grateful to him for his careful recording.

Some two years before this demolition, having heard rumours of the coming event, I had taken the opportunity of inspecting the cottages as they then stood. The buildings then consisted of three cottages on a north south line formed out of a Georgian farmhouse with Regency additions at the south end, with a range of outbuildings at the southern end of the main range of buildings extending eastward at right angles to the cottages. The Regency portion was still tenanted. I was unable to gain access to the northern cottage, the key being lost, but was able to inspect the middle cottage (which was empty) and by permission of the tenant, the southern cottage.

The examination was, of course, hampered by the eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings which obscured the medieval masonry, and none of the features mentioned by Mr. Spittle as being found in the eastern wall were visible, the inner-side of the medieval wall being plastered and wall-papered as part of the cottage wall. Even with these handicaps, however, it was obvious that the eastern wall and parts of the North and West walls of the middle and northern cottages comprised the remains of a substantial medieval building. The cottage and outbuildings to the south (which have not been demolished) contained a considerable quantity of ragstone and flint masonry which

⁸ See later remarks below.

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appeared to represent an eastward extension of the medieval building, but are patched with brick and difficult to interpret. The cellar mentioned by Mr. Spittle was obviously medieval in date, but the tunnel to which he refers was in fact a passage leading to a large nineteenth century cellar immediately beneath the Regency cottage on the southern end of the cottage block.

An inspection of the site suggests that the medieval buildings formed a quadrangle, the recently demolished portion constituting the western side and the surviving buildings forming part of the southern side. To support this suggestion there is still a small section of medieval masonry having a length of about 15 feet, a height of 6 feet, and a thickness of 2 feet running in an east-west direction some 24 feet to the east of the northern end of the recently demolished north-south wall. The masonry of this wall is of knapped flints on the northern face but of rounded or unknapped flints on the southern face. The eastern end of this wall is broken away to ground level and it seems likely that its foundations extend in an easterly direction under the garden ground belonging to the cottages. Any extension of its foundations to the west would be under a farm road. East of the patch of garden ground belonging to the cottages is a small ploughed field which shows a scatter of flint, tiles, and rubble in a north-south trace roughly parallel with the demolished north-south wall of the cottages and at a distance from the demolished cottages of about 120 feet. In the field to the south of the remaining cottage there are similar traces of rubble and tile on an east-west line to a point a little to the west of the surviving cottage.

Further to support this suggestion of a quadrangular form for the original priory buildings the ploughman living in the remaining cottage claimed to have regularly ploughed both these adjoining fields and said that he had from time to time struck foundations whilst ploughing the field to the south of the site, and pointed out three large pieces of ashlar stone which he stated he had brought to the surface whilst ploughing at this point. These stones were apparently quoin stones, and the place where they were ploughed up would represent the south-eastern corner of the conjectured quadrangle. Likewise when in 1957 a cesspool was dug in the cottage gardens at a point roughly in the centre of this quadrangle two burials were found at a depth of 6 to 8 feet. The builder commented that the earth at this point was much disturbed and in his opinion the top layer two or three feet thick was filled earth. Unfortunately these burials were not reported at the time, but it is a plausible suggestion that they were graves of nuns and that the garden ground represented a cloister set within the rectangle of monastic buildings.

It seems that the cottage garden and the ploughland to the east and

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south of the site would well repay careful excavation by anyone interested in medieval monastic buildings.

At this point, something should be said about the much debated question of the original site of the Priory. Older editions of the Ordnance Survey mark the site, the subject of this article, as 'site of Abbey' and Lillechurch, a small farm about a mile to the south-east, as 'site of Priory.' Hasted and Canon Fielding, who wrote *Records of Rochester Diocese, A Handbook of Higham* and other notes about the parish and its priory, both assert that the original site of the priory was at Lillechurch, and that the priory was moved to its present site in the thirteenth century or even as late as the early fourteenth century. The principal grounds adduced for this tradition is, firstly, the change of name of the Priory from Lillechurch to Higham, and secondly the existence of ruins of the earlier priory in the orchard at the back of the farmhouse at Lillechurch. I cannot find, however, that either ground has much to recommend it. There is little doubt that the original grant on the foundation of the Priory, which I will refer to later, was of the church of 'Lillechurch,' but it is incorrect to say that Lillechurch was the regular name of the priory until the end of the thirteenth century. The Close Rolls refer to the Prioress of Lillechurch in 1233 and 1234, but in 1237 and 1252 she is the Prioress of Higham. The Patent Rolls call her Prioress of Lillechurch in 1247 and 1266, but of Higham in 1265. Hasted seems to have considered that the Higham of Domesday consisted of the manors of Higham and Lillechurch. He treats the name Lillechurch as synonymous with Higham, but, quite illogically, makes the Priory shift its location from Lillechurch to Higham when the name Lillechurch ceased to be used, as certainly happened by the end of the thirteenth century. Examination of the sites is not very helpful. When Thorpe visited the site at Lillechurch in 1776 he noted that nothing was visible, but Canon Fielding confidently asserts that the outline of the chapel could be seen in the grass of the orchard in dry summers. I visited the site of Lillechurch in 1965 and found that the old orchard was being mechanically grubbed. The scar of the uprooting had only one point where a few nondescript flints were dragged to the surface, but although flints are not to be expected in the loamy alluvial soil of this field and the flints were roughly on the site shown on the Ordnance Survey, they were near farm buildings and may well have been hardcore for a farm track. I was told by the tenant and his sons that they knew of the tradition of the priory site, but although they had watched the grubbing they had seen nothing except these flints. Likewise they were quite certain that they had never observed any traces or outlines in the grass during dry weather as Canon Fielding claims to have done. I must report, however, that on leaving the site, I found embedded in the road bank at the entrance to

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the farm a section of curved masonry about 18 in. long with a simple hood or drip moulding on it. The curve suggests an early English window,⁴ and I record it for what it is worth, as my only positive observation on this site.

There is some documentary evidence to suggest that about the time of the Conquest there were indeed two churches or chapels one at Lillechurch and the other Higham since both appear in the well known list of churches⁹ in the *Textus Roffensis*. There is a gift of a chalice to the Church of Lillechurch recorded in the *Close Rolls* as late as 1246,¹⁰ which seems unlikely to have been meant as a gift to Higham Church.

I have considered the relative importance of these sites, so far as is possible, in a medieval context, and although St. Mary's Church today seems a lonely outpost on the edge of the North Kent marshes whilst Lillechurch stands in the rich arable farmlands of Higham, in medieval times the situation was very different. Higham in those days was the Kentish end of a ferry to Essex and the mile long causeway from near Higham Church to the river-bank (a causeway which still projects some way into the river at this point) was a highway for traffic of all sorts between East Anglia, Kent and the Continent. Likewise even in Domesday the Manor of Higham had a fishery worth three shillings. Lillechurch was then and still is on a by-way. Thus it seems that the present site was even at the Conquest an important one and more likely to be selected as the place to establish a Nunnery particularly when the franchise of the ferry became part of its revenues. Whether Lillechurch was, as Hasted supposed, the same thing as Higham or whether it was a separate place, which gave its name to the Priory because its Church was the first of the endowments of the Priory, is now only a matter for conjecture. Unless excavation of the Lillechurch site or the Higham site gives a definite answer, I must suggest that it is wiser to assume that Hasted and Fielding were mistaken and that the Priory always stood near Higham Church and that the 'ruins' at Lillechurch (if they have any foundation in fact) are the ruins of the Church of Lillechurch.

The history of this small priory (like that of so many small medieval foundations) is confused and obscure. Perhaps its chief claim to fame is that it was dissolved, not by Henry VIII but by Bishop Fisher, who was later martyred for objecting to the Act of Supremacy, under which the general dissolution of monasteries took place.

Most authorities agree that the foundation of the Priory was by King Stephen in about 1148, originally as a dependency of S. Sulpice of Rennes in Brittany.¹¹ According to statements made at its dissolution it was

⁹ A.C. XLIV, 50.

¹⁰ Calendar of Close Rolls.

¹¹ Tanner's *Notitia Monastica*.

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originally a foundation for some fifteen or sixteen nuns, and at its dissolution seems to have been fairly well endowed with lands in Higham, Shorne and parts of the Hoo Peninsula. The earliest direct record of the priory seems to be the confirmation by Gilbert de Glanville, Bishop of Rochester (c. 1185-1214) on the occasion of his ordaining a vicarage in the church of Lillechurch, of earlier letters of Walter, Bishop of Rochester (c. 1148) notifying the surrender of the church of Lillechurch by the Abbey of St. John's, Colchester, and the granting of the church to Mary, daughter of King Stephen and the nuns of Lillechurch.¹²

For the next hundred years little information about the Priory seems to have survived. Fielding in his *Records of Rochester* publishes a list of Prioresses, of which the first twelve are said to be recorded in a memorial service of the Priory preserved in the archives of St. John's College, Cambridge, but the dates of their election during this period are unknown. The manor of Lillechurch is said to have been granted to the Priory by King John 'for the safety of his soul' according to the Patent Rolls,¹³ or 'for £100' according to Hasted. If Hasted is correct then the recorded grant was probably a confirmation for cash by John of an earlier grant by one of his predecessors and thus suggests that the Priory acquired the Manor in the twelfth century, after it had reverted to the Crown from William de Ipre.¹⁴

In 1270 there was apparently trouble between the Prioress Acelina and her nuns for in that year 'on account of the contention and discord between the Prioress and the convent of the house' the King took the Priory into his own hands and committed it to Ralph de Frenyngham, the Kings Clerk, to keep in order. This is confirmed later in the same year when the management of the Priory passed successively into the hands of the Dean of Shoreham, Richard, the King's brother, and finally John de Cobham.¹⁵ Acelina finally ceased to be Prioress in 1275 and Amfelisia de Dunlege was elected in her stead.

Amfelisia seems to have been notable, first for failing to keep the causeway leading to Higham Ferry in repair¹⁶ and, on her death, for the mortuary roll still preserved in the archives of St. John's Cambridge, containing the names of some 363 religious houses and their prayers for her soul. The franchise of the Higham Ferry seems to have been a valuable asset of the Manor of Higham in those days, and it was during the next fifty years or so that the Priory attained its greatest prosperity. Mr. Spittle's report on the surviving ruins of the Priory indicate that in the

¹² *Registrum Hamonis Hethe* published by K. A. S. Records Branch, Part 1, p. 27.

¹³ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1266.

¹⁴ *Hasted*, Vol. 3, p. 483.

¹⁵ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1270.

¹⁶ *Hasted*, Vol. 3, p. 483.

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fourteenth century there was a building or rebuilding of the priory, and the prosperity and activity of the Priory in the fourteenth century is confirmed to some extent by a Papal Indulgence granted in 1357 to the Priory for the purpose of raising funds for building work at St. Mary's Church nearby and by documents dated in 1346 preserved in the archives of St. John's College connected with the construction of a conduit from 'La Gore' (presumably somewhere near Gore Green, Higham some half a mile away, where there are still springs) to the Priory. The lengthy proceedings recorded in Bishop Hamo de Hethe's register¹⁷ in which some thirteen nuns are named shows that the Bishop found all well on the election of Elizabeth de Delham as the new Prioress on the death of Matilda de Grenested. After this, however, apart from the list of Prioresses recorded in Fielding's *Records of Rochester* there appears to be little printed record of the Priory until the beginning of the sixteenth century, when we find the Priory described by Leland as 'a poor priory of nunnes.'

It is interesting to speculate on the decline. Those with a tendency to attribute all history to economic factors might well suggest that the decay followed the falling into disuse of the Higham Ferry, in the late medieval period, but it may have been the shortcomings of some Prioress such as Acelina in the thirteenth century.

St. John's College, Cambridge, is said to have complete accounts of the farms attached to the Priory covering a period from 1283 to its dissolution, and a study of these would probably reflect the conduct of the monastery in the days of its prime and decline, but I have neither the time nor the ability to explore this interesting bye-way of medieval history which would certainly repay further study.

The story of the final dissolution of the Priory can, however, be derived from two allied but quite independent sources; the Bishop's Registers and Act Books and the final proceedings for dissolution which (somewhat surprisingly, considering the circumstances) make no reference to the Bishop's Registers or Act Books and tell a somewhat different story.

The sixteenth century opens with an entry in the Bishop's Register¹⁸ in 1501 recording that the Bishop had been informed that Elizabeth Bradforth the Prioress had resigned and that a meeting in the Priory Chapter House had revealed that there were only two professed nuns suitable—one Grimeston and Agnes Swayne. Of these, Agnes Swayne was elected Prioress. Whether there were other unsuitable nuns in the house at the time is not clear, but in the evidence given at the dissolution twenty years later it is said that Bishop Fisher on becoming Bishop

¹⁷ Part 6, p. 618.

¹⁸ Episcopal Register, IV, 1492-1542.

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in 1504 took steps to settle the number of nuns at five. This is confirmed by his professing Anchoreta Ungethorp in January, 1506/7 and Godliva Lawrence and Elizabeth Penny in March, 1508/9.¹⁹ Five nuns do not constitute a very strong house, but it seems to have been the best the Bishop could do and it should be noted (in the light of the later proceedings) that these three nuns were professed by the Bishop himself.

In May, 1508 Edward Steroper (or Sharpe as he appears in Fielding's *Records of Rochester*) was instituted Vicar of St. Mary's Higham²⁰ a year after Anchoreta Ungethorp was professed by the Bishop and rather less than a year before Godliva Lawrence and Elizabeth Penny were professed. On 2nd October, 1512, the Bishop had occasion to admonish Edward Steroper and enjoined him that he should not keep company with the Lady Anchoreta Ungethorp, a nun there on pain of his oath, 'and he did it secretly in his chamber as he alleged.'²¹ This discreet admonition was apparently not enough for on the 28th October the Lord Commissary admonished the Vicar in his own Parish Church in writing a first, second and third time that he should not keep company with the Lady Anchoreta Ungethorp, with whom he had previously been presented and suspected of associating, except in public places, on pain of the greater excommunication and deprivation of his benefice. The Lord Commissary also admonished the nun in the Chapter House of the Priory.²² A few months later Edward Steroper had resigned and a new Vicar, one John Parker was instituted in April, 1513.²³

This is not, however, the end of the Higham story as recorded in the Bishop's Books. In July, 1513, shortly after the change of Vicars is an entry that at the Chapter House of the Priory 'There appeared in person the Lady Anchoreta Ungethorp, Sub-Prioress there, Elizabeth Penny and Godliva Lawrence as well as Agnes Swayne the aged Prioress there and humbly on their bended knees, they petitioned the Reverend Father . . . they wished to inclose themselves for the increase of virtue and the perfect observance of their rule . . . to surround their house with a stone wall: and the Reverend Father granted them their petition.' To this entry a marginal insertion adds 'And on account of the necessity of extinguishing the ill repute spread about concerning them.'²⁴

Then to add a sort of footnote to the general character of Priory an entry in the Act Books in October, 1513 notes²⁵ that 'one Bardefelde' was absolved from the offence of secret communications with the nuns. Finally in the following year 1514 Anchoreta Ungethorp, the erring

¹⁹ Episcopal Register, IV, 1492-1542. Pages 44 and 51.

²⁰ Episcopal Register, IV, 1492-1542, p. 50.

²¹ Rochester Probate Act Books, p. 49.

²² Rochester Probate Act Books, p. 61.

²³ Episcopal Register, IV, p. 62.

²⁴ Rochester Probate Act Books, f. 115.

²⁵ Rochester Probate Act Books, f. 125.

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nun, was, somewhat surprisingly elected Prioress of the Nunnery.²⁶

So much for the moral state of the Priory as recorded in contemporary records. The Bishop's Books record one more item of a different nature concerning the Priory in January, 1519/20 which suggests a monetary link with the subsequent proceedings to dissolve the nunnery. An entry in the Act Books records the visit of the Bishop's Officer to the Priory, by direction of the Bishop, when he examined the Lady Prioress and the Lady Agnes Swayne and got from them what amounts to a confession that Anchoreta Ungethorp was trying to take money from the Common Chest of the Priory to give to her sister, to whom she owed money. The Bishop seems to have been convinced that the Prioress was squandering the monies of the Priory and sequestered the monies of the Priory reserving the allotment of the sequestration to himself.²⁷ Whether the Bishop had sent his official to Higham to see what he could find out about the Priory finances with the intention of using them for some other purpose is not clear, but we know the needs of the College of St. John, Cambridge, which had been founded by Lady Margaret, Countess of Darby, grandmother of King Henry VIII, of whose Will the Bishop was an Executor, was a constant preoccupation of the Bishop at this time and by December, 1521 the dissolution of the Priory was complete.

The dissolution proceedings are preserved in the archives of the College and have been printed and commented upon²⁸ but on each occasion without reference to the earlier proceedings and it is interesting to mark the variations between the Bishop's Act Books and the facts which were alleged in the proceedings to justify the dissolution. The proceedings are of considerable length and are printed in full in latin in *Lewis's Life of Bishop Fisher*.²⁹ They begin with a long statement by Dr. Richard Sharp, Master of the College of St. John, whom the Bishop seems to have conveniently appointed procurator. Dr. Sharp reported there had once been sixteen nuns at the house, now never more than three or four. These nuns were vehemently noted for incontinence and many of them had been corrupted by a Priest and some made pregnant (accordingly they were legally convicted before the Bishop) and divine worship, regular observance, hospitality, and almsgiving, works of piety, etc. were in recent days manifestly declined and diminished. After two pages of this sort of thing, follow the resignations of three nuns—Agnes Swayne, Elizabeth Penny, Godliva Lawrence and the statements of four witnesses John James, the servant of the Priory,

²⁶ Episcopal Register, IV, p. 72.

²⁷ Rochester Probate Act Books, f. 52.

²⁸ Baskerville, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries*, p. 101-2. Thomas Baker, *History of St. John's College, Cambridge*, 1869, pp. 88-9.

²⁹ Lewis, *Life of Bishop Fisher*, 2 vols. 1855, ed. by T. Hudson Turner.

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John Standenought, a Priest, Eleanor Smyth, a midwife, and Richard Donyell, an old man from Cliffe.

The evidence of John James is the most detailed and explicit. He says that about twelve years ago (that is about 1508/9) he first became acquainted with the Priory when he was first employed there when he never saw more than three or four nuns and that the Priory was very much frequented by lascivious persons mostly clerical and that the nuns living there were notorious for their incontinence. Likewise in those years the Church, Convent, Manor and buildings were falling into ruin. The Bishop had instructed him to hire workers and do repairs, but because there was no money in the Priory to complete the work, the Bishop gave of his own money and procured other contributions by his own efforts. He further states that the Bishop had raised the number of nuns to five. He then makes the specific allegation against Elizabeth Penny and Godliva Lawrence that they had been made pregnant by Edward Steroper the Priest. They had given birth within the monastery. He says he knew this because he was told by the Lady Anchoreta Ungethorp, the Prioress. He also says that he went with the Bishop to the Priory to make examination of the said charge and after this it came to his knowledge that Elizabeth had conceived. He went into the cloister of the monastery where he saw Elizabeth Penny sitting in tears. When he said to her 'Alas, Madam, howe happened this with you?' she answered 'And I had ben happye I might a caused this thing to have ben unknowen and hydden.'

The evidence of John Standenought, the Priest, indicates that for some nine years (say back to 1511/2) on the orders of the Bishop he had celebrated mass at the monastery. He knew about the charges because he had had a lot of conversation there and saw with his own eyes much of what is cited. He says that the Bishop had settled the number of nuns at five and that he heard from many worthy of credence and from the nurse when the child of Elizabeth Penny was being fed that she and Godliva Lawrence had been made pregnant by Master Edward Steroper, Vicar of Higham, and he had heard that the Bishop had imposed a penance for what they had done.

Eleanor Smyth of Cliffe testified that nine or ten years before (about 1510/11) Elizabeth Penny had given birth to a male child in the Priory and she knew because she was midwife present with the Lady Anchoreta Ungethorp and that she afterwards reared the child until it died. Richard Donyell an old man 'Broken' by age says he first knew the Priory when it had only three nuns, but later it had five. He knew about Elizabeth Penny's child because he had been told by Eleanor Smyth. All of these witnesses all say that the conduct of the monastery was common rumour in the surrounding country.

On this evidence the priory was dissolved. It is a sorry story.

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At that time stories of general incontinence by nuns and clerics were part of the folklore of the English countryside, although, as we have seen, the Bishop's Act Books contain records which give some support to this tradition. One could have wished, however, that the charges in the dissolution proceedings were as contemporary and well proved as the earlier proceedings against Anchoreta Ungethorp and the Vicar. The charges against Godliva Lawrence are based on hearsay evidence of the most general character. Elizabeth Penny's child is well authenticated but John Standenought, the Priest, who gave evidence, said that he had heard that the Bishop had imposed a penance on both nuns for what they had done, and it seems a pity this did not find mention in the Bishop's Act Book. Finally apart from the Prioress' financial peccadillos of the previous year, the Priory with its new wall, and its prayers to the Bishop might be said to have to some extent reformed itself after the Vicar had left. It had at least been free from reproach for some eight years, as none of the evidence suggests any irregularity after the time of the Vicar's leaving.

The Prioress Anchoreta Ungethorp had apparently died after the incident about money recorded in the Act Book of 1519/20, as only the 'Aged Prioress' Agnes Swayne and the two nuns Elizabeth Penny and Godliva Lawrence made the surrender of the Priory. This may account for the absence of any reference to her admonition in 1512 in the proceedings for dissolution, but it offered the Bishop an opportunity, which he did not take, to appoint a strong prioress in her place to carry on the work of reform. All this indicates that the real object of the proceedings was to provide funds for the College, and the procedure and evidence offered, as well as the real reason for dissolution, is a most uncanny fore-shadowing of the post reformation proceedings of Henry VIII's Commissioners some twenty years later. No doubt the King marked well the procedure when he graciously acceded to his Bishop's petition for the dissolution of the priory.

The similarity of the pre-reformation and post reformation dissolution is further marked by what appears to be a survival from the days following the dissolution in Higham Church. Local tradition has it that the Church served as the Chapel for the Priory and local rumour has created an improbable crypt under the northern chancel of the Church (still sometimes called the Nun's chapel) with an equally improbable tunnel from the Priory to the crypt. The entrance to the crypt is said to be the altar tomb in the north east corner of the chancel. On examination the slab of the tomb is apparently an altar slab, bearing the five crosses normally incised on medieval altars, but the tomb and its stonework is clearly derived from elsewhere, since the panels have been altered to fit and the slab itself has a small strip added at the east end to complete the tomb. Even more significant the tomb would

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appear to be associated with a brass above the tomb dated 1523. It is unlikely that in 1523 a church altar would have been looted to provide the stone for the tomb, but it suggests that there was a chapel in the Priory which was then being used as a quarry for material with as little regard for its sacred character as that accorded to Priors dissolved after the reformation.

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