

The Rediscovering Alvingham Priory sign is to be found just inside the church's enclosure when entered from the direction of Alvingham village. The commemorative plaque is situated immediately behind you when reading the Priory notice.



A Gilbertine House

The monastic house at Alvingham was in existence by the 21st of January 1155, when Hugh of Scoteni granted the church of Cockerington, land, and a mill known as Wramline to Alvingham Priory.

Medieval Gilbertine priories were unusual in that they were often 'dual houses', having both nuns and canons. They lived in completely separate areas which were probably connected by a corridor which contained the domus fenestrate or window house, designed so the speakers could not see each other. The nuns were allowed to talk with their parents and others (though always with at least one witness present) at a window as long as a finger and as broad as a thumb.

The priory would have generally been populated with people from the wealthier section of the local community, and these families also gave gifts to support the priory. Grants of lands or alms were recorded, for example, "for the charitable maintenance of guests", "for the nuns' smocks", and undertaking "to repair the dyke...so that Alvingham Priory's meadow and all the village of Alvingham next to the dyke in the east are protected from flooding".



Alvingham Priory around 1400. Copyright Peter Dunn 2010.

Two Churches, One Churchyard

More than one church in a churchyard is extremely rare. Here St Mary's sits outside its parish of North Cockerington to share with St Adelwald's. The earliest reference dates from the early 13th century, when Bishop Hugh of Wells appointed Adam of Kedlington to the vicarage of Alvingham and St Mary Cockerington "which two churches are in one and the same cemetery".



St Mary's Church. Photo by Tim Quirk/The Churches Conservation Trust.

St Mary's is looked after by The Churches Conservation Trust, a national charity which cares for over 340 of England's finest historic churches which are no longer required for regular parish worship.



This effigy of a man "with a window long slit" survives in St Mary's Church as part of a finely moulded effigy of a knight by Jan Allen, Lincolnshire County Council. Photo by Jan.

Founded by Gilbert, the Lincolnshire Saint

St Gilbert founded his first nunnery at Sempringham in Lincolnshire, when seven women approached him to create a community for them to follow the 'vita Apostolica', the apostolic life of extreme poverty and asceticism. The nuns of the Order kept the rule of St Benedict, "so far as the weakness of their sex permitted". Lay sisters and brothers, then Augustinian canons were introduced to deal with worldly matters so the sisters could focus on a cloistered life of prayer.



A Gilbertine nun and canon, from Sir William Dugdale.

The Gilbertines were highly respected and popular with the Crown, particularly given it was an English Order, but their houses were never particularly wealthy. Half of the Gilbertine priories which were founded in England were in Lincolnshire.

The priory survived for several years into the Dissolution, rehousing a number of nuns and priors from dissolved monastic houses elsewhere. The priory was finally closed by Henry VIII in 1538 and subsequently fell into ruin.

Pensions were recorded for both men and women at Alvingham after the Dissolution including "Robert Whittinge of Thoresbe formerly a canon of Alvingham with a pension of 2 1/2s 4d" and "Margaret Lewes of Louth formerly a nun of Alvingham with a pension of £2 granted 20 November, 30 Henry VIII (1538). She was never married and is of good report".

The Site Today

Little now survives except for earthworks of fishponds and the monastic precinct banks and ditch, particularly well preserved in the northeastern corner. The material of the buildings themselves would have been reused in the area, and coming from a sacred site such as this it may have been felt to have given sacred status to new buildings.

Geophysical survey undertaken in 2009 by kind permission of the landowner revealed probable traces of the former abbey to the south and west of the farm, and possible traces of former structures just north of the churches.

