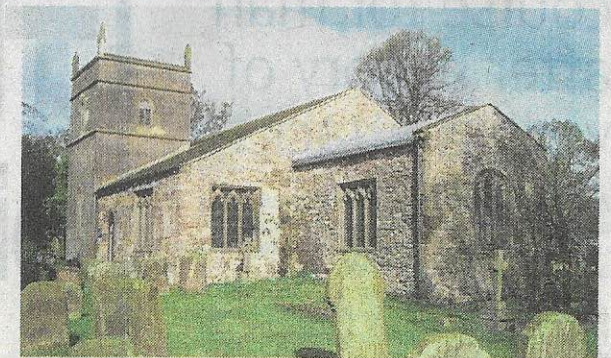


HERITAGE: The wealthiest of families populated the priory and gave nuns gifts



First person
Jan Allen,
historic
environment
officer

Rediscovering historic priory



Siting: St Mary's church sits outside its parish of North Cockerington. Left, this alabaster lion survives in the church

Two churches, one churchyard

Having more than one church in a churchyard is extremely rare, but here St Mary's sits outside its parish of North Cockerington, sharing a cemetery with St Adelwold's.

The earliest reference dates from the early 13th century, when Bishop Hugh of Wells appointed Adam of Keddington to the vicarage of Alvingham and St Mary Cockerington "which two churches are in one and the same cemetery".

Alvingham Priory

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

Medieval Gilbertine priories were unusual in that they were often "dual houses", having both nuns and canons. They lived in separate areas which were probably connected by a corridor which contained the domus fenestrae 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 been

populated with people from the wealthier section of the community, and these families also gave gifts.

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".

Founded by Gilbert, the Lincolnshire saint
St Gilbert founded his first nunnery



Artist's view: A reconstruction illustration of Alvingham Priory around 1400AD

at Sempringham, 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".

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 that 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 Thoresbie formerly a canon of Alvingham with a pension of 2 13s 4d" and "Margaret Lewes of Louth formerly a nun of Alvingham with a pen(sion) of £2 granted 20 November, Henry VIII (1538). She was never married and is of good report".

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.

A 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.

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