

Barnwell Priory

by
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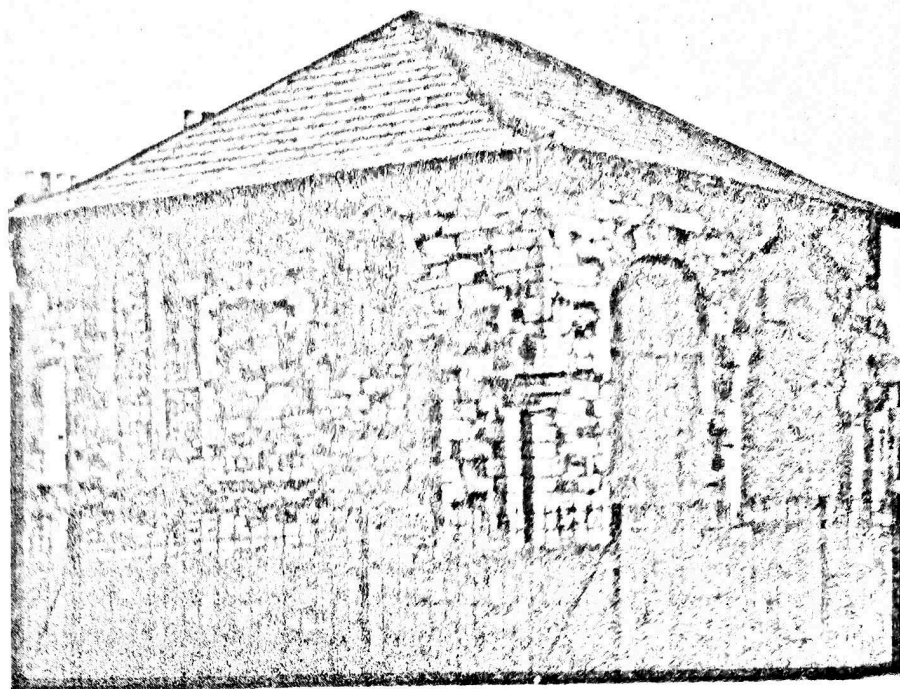
In the opening years of the last century, the town of Cambridge, with a population of only 9,726, excluding the University, consisted of little more than what, today, we call the "historic centre". All around lay open fields—Cambridge Fields to the north and west, Barnwell Fields to the south and east.

The Barnwell Fields were bounded on the north by the river, from Jesus Green to the Newmarket Road railway bridge, and included Coldham Common. The boundary line then crossed the modern Coldham's Lane, Cherryinton Road and Hills Road until, at Hobson's Brook, it turned townwards to the present site of Hobson's Conduit. From here it followed the present Lensfield Road, crossed Parker's Piece to Parkside and Parker Street, went along Emmanuel Road to the end of Short Street where, after passing Jesus Grove and Jesus Green, it joined the northern boundary at the river.

The Enclosure Act of 1807 made this large area, with the exception of Midsummer, Stourbridge and Coldham Commons, available for private ownership. Development soon began, and the first three or four decades of the century saw the development of such streets as East Road, New Street, Gold Street and many others in the Barnwell area of which the nucleus was the former tiny hamlet of Barnwell, described by 18th century writers as a "pleasant little village".

This village had grown up first in the 12th century, with the building of the Barnwell Priory—nearly always erroneously called Barnwell Abbey.

This house of Canons Regular had originally been established, in 1092, near the present St. Giles' Church in Castle Street, by the Norman Sheriff of Cambridgeshire, Picot, as a thank-offering for the recovery of his wife from a serious illness. Before, however, the buildings he had planned were completed, both Picot and his wife died. The wealth and estates which he possessed would



The Cellarer's Checker, a surviving fragment of Barnwell Priory.

have passed to his son, but the latter had been found guilty of treason. They were granted, therefore, by the King, to Pain Peverel, who had been standard bearer to Robert, Duke of Normandy, in the first Crusade.

Canons in sad plight

When Peverel visited his estates, he found the little community of canons at Castle End in a sad plight, suffering from lack of fresh water and with their buildings incomplete and in disrepair. He determined, therefore, to move them to a healthier site and, accordingly, obtained from Henry I the grant of 13 acres of land in Barnwell, between the modern Newmarket Road and the river and bounded by the present River Lane and Walnut Tree Avenue, the last-named recently demolished to make way for the new bridge road.

On the site was a spring of fresh water at which, apparently, it had for long been the custom for youths to gather in spring to hold wrestling matches, and to entertain themselves by singing and dancing. Indeed, the very name **Barnwell** was long thought to derive from this **Bairns' Well**, although, more probably, the well once belonged to one Beorna.

The site was appropriate, too, for the building which Peverel planned, because, near the well, a Saxon hermit, named Godesone, had built a small wooden oratory dedicated to St. Andrew.

Peverel intended that his new foundation should be large enough to house 30 canons—the number of the years of his age. By the year 1112, sufficient accommodation had been erected for the Castle End canons to be moved to Barnwell, and the building of their great church had begun. When Peverel died, ten years later, he was buried before its high altar. In 1191, much of the church was pulled down, with the exception of the choir, and rebuilt with the financial help of Everard de Beche, Lord of the Manor of Papworth, from whom the village of Papworth Everard takes its name.

The monastic church, dedicated to St. Giles and St. Andrew, lay behind the present church of St. Andrew the Less. To the north of the nave were the cloisters, from which the canons could gain access to their refectory on the west, and to the chapter house on the east. North of the chapter house lay the canons' dormer or sleeping quarters; behind the kitchen, which adjoined the refectory, was an outer court containing the brewhouse and bakehouse while, on the west of the dormer, was the farmery or hospital. Here were treated

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not only those canons who had fallen sick, but also the lay people who, on the building of the priory, had come to live at its gates, so forming the little hamlet of Barnwell.

These people, at first, attended services in the canons' church, but early in the 13th century, doubtless finding their growing numbers a problem, the canons built for the villagers the church of St. Andrew the Less.

The priory guest house served, in its day, to entertain many important visitors. King John stayed there in 1203. He was a generous benefactor of the canons and gave to them, in 1211, the proceeds of midsummer fair. Henry III was another royal visitor and so, too, was Edward I. In 1388, Richard III not only stayed at the priory but summoned Parliament to meet him there; in 1438 the prior entertained Henry VI.

Towards the end of Edward I's reign, a member of the priory began to write, in Latin, a chronicle called the *Liber Memorandum* of Barnwell. His main object in so doing was to record, not only the history of the house, but to make clear to future generations exactly what were the legal rights of the prior and canons, should these ever be questioned. For life at Barnwell was not wholly one of prayer and contemplation. On many occasions the prior was in dispute with the tenants of the many properties which the priory owned, with the mayor and corporation of Cambridge, and with the university.

The Barnwell chronicler recorded, in detail, all such disputes and lawsuits. He recorded local and national affairs from 1290 to 1296. He transcribed the statutes of the realm and the rules of the Order of St. Augustine, which the canons followed; he wrote out a list of the prior's tenants in the various parishes of Cambridge—their names, the lands they held and the rents they paid.

Among outstanding events that he recorded was the fire which broke out in the priory church, in the evening of February 3rd, 1287, while the canons were singing the office of Compline. During a violent storm the upper part of the cross on the tower was struck by lightning and: "there flew out, with terrible violence, sparks like arrows, and melted like flakes of snow and burnt the houses of our neighbours . . . God knows what losses we then sustained in respect of

stonework broke, of the clock, of lead, of windows, of bells cracked, of damage done to our neighbours."

But the priory had other troubles. In their war against the king, the barons made their stronghold in the Isle of Ely whence marauding bands ravaged the countryside. A manor at Wiggenhall in Norfolk, belonging to the priory, was attacked and the prior, who was staying there, had his horses seized. Another priory manor in Bourn, Cambridgeshire, was burned, and in Barnwell, a rebel baron demanded of the prior the key to the granary and foodstores, a demand which resulted in a sword fight between the prior's defenders and the rebel party.

Mob tore up trees

In the unrest which resulted from the economic depression following the Black Death, and which culminated in the Peasants' Rising of 1381, crowds assembled on Midsummer Common on 17 June. From there they marched to the priory where they broke down and took away trees from ground which, they claimed, was common land which had been unlawfully enclosed by the prior. The last-named claimed, of the king, the exorbitant sum of £4,000 in damages.

In Henry VIII's reign, along with other religious houses, Barnwell Priory was suppressed. By 1578, only forty years later the buildings were being used as a quarry, large quantities of their stone going to Corpus Christi College, among other places, for the building of a new chapel. The priory estate was granted to Lord Clinton from whom it passed to other private owners until, in 1659, Mr. Alexander Butler obtained it from the then owner, Sir Thomas Chicheley, in exchange for a manor in Orwell. Mr. Butler built, on part of the estate, a timber-framed house, eventually known as the Abbey House, which still stands in Abbey Road. His son, Ambrose, "modernised" and extended it in 1678, which date is carved on its "Dutch" gable. The entrance to the house, before Beche Road and Abbey Road were built in 1887, was through handsome stone gates on Newmarket Road. In the grounds can still be seen fragments of stone-

work from the old priory, while along Abbey Road several houses have on them odd pieces of carving rescued, doubtless, from the priory ruins. In the Folk Museum is a stone angel which once adorned some part of the priory.

Miraculously, one portion of the great religious house escaped destruction. It is the little building, in Beche Road, known as the Cellarer's Checker. It is generally assumed to have been used as an office by the checker, the monastic official who was in charge of the food, drink, property and general temporal affairs of the priory. It may well, though, have been part of the dwelling which Prior Jolan, who resigned in 1265, built for his retirement and in which he lived until his death in c. 1285. The church of St. Andrew the Less, which the canons built for the Barnwell villagers' use, still stands, of course, in Newmarket Road, while a portion of the old priory wall can still be seen in Beche Road.

The Butler family, the last of whom to hold the estate was the eccentric Jacob Butler who died in 1765, preserved the ruins of the priory. But in 1809, Lord Gwydir came into possession of the property, and almost at once the remains of the buildings were removed for use as building material, the foundations were dug up and the site was levelled.

In 1879, the "Abbey Estate" was sold, on the death of its then owner, Dr. Geldart, along with 28 acres along Mill Road. The Abbey Estate included the Abbey House and Cellarer's Checker, together with land and houses in Newmarket Road. It was purchased by Mr. Joseph Sturton, who had a druggist's and oil merchant's business in Fitzroy Street, and who made new roads and sold most of the land for building houses which, he envisaged, would be occupied by working people of moderate means. The Cellarer's Checker he presented to the Cambridge Antiquarian Society; in recent years it has become the property of Cambridge Corporation.

Though there is little visible evidence, now, of the once great priory of Barnwell, the names of its priors are recalled in the names of such streets as Rawlyn Road, Thorley Road, Stanesfield Road and Stanesfield Close; those of its founder and one of its benefactors live on in Peverel Road and Beche Road.