

THE LAST DAYS OF THE ABBEY

By the 15th century the fortunes of monasteries and abbeys in England began to decline. People increasingly gave estates and gifts to the churches rather than to abbeys. Monks were often seen as lazy parasites, unworthy of respect. An Inspection by the Bishop of Lincoln accused the monks in Eynsham of spending their time drinking and gambling in the village and neglecting their holy responsibilities.



STONE CARVING

Finally, Henry VIII confiscated the property of all the monasteries, and closed them down. The abbey was surrendered to the King on December 4th, 1538, and the monks were pensioned off. Several quickly found clerical posts in the Protestant church, most notably The abbot who became the Bishop of Llandaff.



STONE CARVING

AFTER THE ABBEY

Some of the buildings were quickly wrecked by the King's men, so that the monks could not return. The precinct eventually became the property of the Earl of Derby, who lived in the abbot's lodgings. The only record of the abbey buildings was made in 1657, when the Oxford antiquarian Anthony Wood drew a sketch of the ruined west end of the abbey church. Shortly after this the site was cleared of all traces of the abbey buildings, and much of the building stone was used to construct new houses in the village.

ECHOES OF THE ABBEY TODAY

Although the abbey buildings have long since disappeared, the effect of the abbey on the modern village can still be seen. Fragments of carved stone, like those in the Heritage Trail stations, are visible in some of the old cottages in the heart of the village, clustered around the market square with its preaching cross. This is a replica of the original where monks would read Bible passages to the villagers. The abbey's own water supply once flowed in a stone channel called a conduit from a spring at the far end of Conduit Lane, off Mill Street. Newland Street marks the abbey's (unsuccessful!) attempt at property speculation. A wide variety of objects, some rescued over the years, some excavated recently, are deposited in the Oxfordshire County Council Museum at Standlake.



BUCKLE SAXON



KEY MEDIEVAL

Coming soon from Oxford Archaeology -

'Aelfric's Abbey: Excavations at Eynsham Abbey, Oxfordshire, 1989-1992' and

'Eynsham, a village and its Abbey'.

Both available from good bookshops and www.oxfordarch.co.uk



The following bodies and individuals contributed to the creation of The Eynsham Abbey Heritage Trail:

Funding:

The Heritage Lottery Fund
Eynsham History Group
West Oxfordshire District Council and Eynsham Parish Council
Harry Lange
Abbey Properties

We are grateful to the following for permissions to build on their land:

The National Playing Fields Association
West Oxfordshire District Council and Eynsham Parish Council
St Peter's Church
Mr W.S.Hoskins



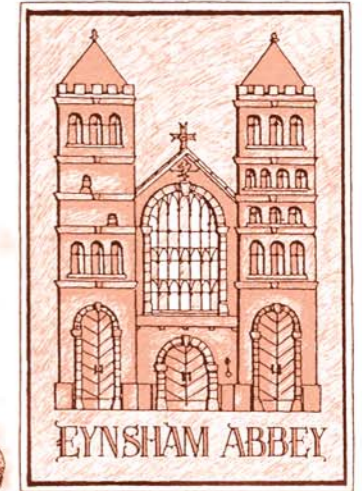
BOOK CLASP



HORSE BRASS



BOOK CLASP



EYNSHAM ABBEY

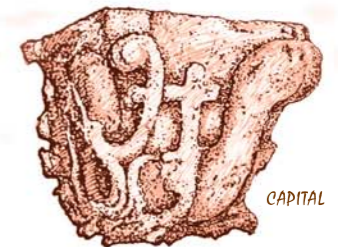


EYNSHAM ABBEY HERITAGE TRAIL



MEDIEVAL GLASS - ST. ANDREW

A WALK INTO THE PAST, AROUND THE PRECINCT OF EYNSHAM ABBEY



CAPITAL

Design and construction:

Oxford Archaeological Unit
Eynsham History Group
Oxfordshire County Council Museums Services
W.S.Atkins Ltd.
Leadbitters Construction Ltd.
Harry Lange and John Lange

Text by Alan Hardy
Design and illustration by Harry Lange and Anne Dunkley

"To the brothers at Eynsham, greetings in Christ"
(Aelfric, 1st abbot of Eynsham Abbey 1005)

By the end of the 10th century, the young nation of England was in a desperate situation. Repeated attacks by invaders from Scandinavia - the Vikings - and a sense that the world was literally coming to an end, a thousand years after Christ's birth, meant that kings sought to please God, and guarantee his help, by doing good works like founding religious houses. Eynsham Abbey was one of the last abbeys founded by a Saxon king.



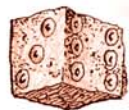
KEY
MEDIEVAL

The foundation charter of Eynsham Abbey stated that King Aethelred "by the grace and mercy of God, king and ruler of the realm of the English gives authority to Aethelmaer a man of outstanding loyalty to myself and very dear to me" to establish a monastery "at an important place, hard by the river Thames and called Eynsham by those who live in that part of the country". Eynsham was as important as Oxford at that time, and there had been a large church on the site for at least 200 years.



SHUTTLE (ANTLER)

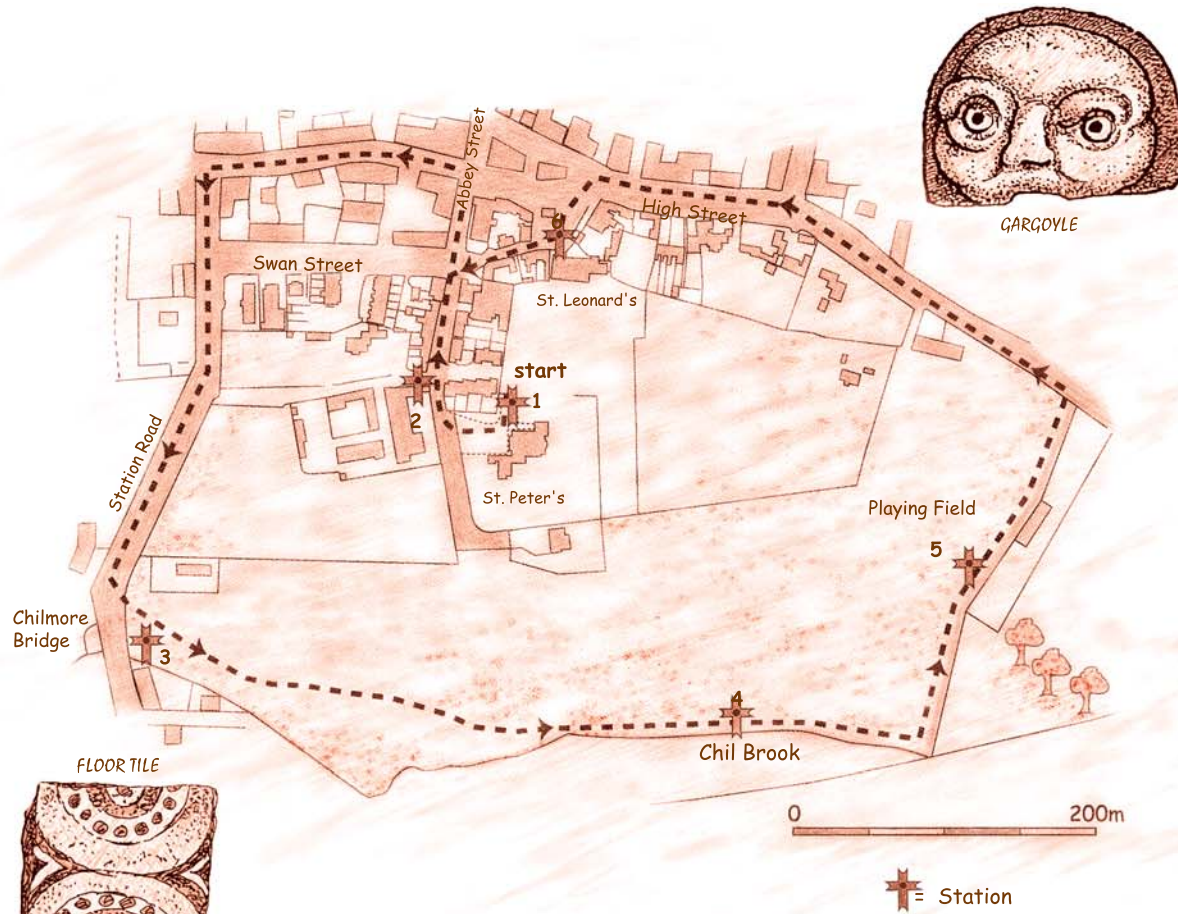
The abbey followed the Benedictine Rule, which emphasised obedience, silence and humility, and stressed the importance of manual labour as well as prayer and worship. The first abbot of the new abbey was Aelfric, one of the greatest writers of his age. Soon after he took office, Aelfric wrote his 'Letter to the Monks of Eynsham' in which he detailed the way in which the monks should conduct themselves from day to day. We do not know precisely when Aelfric died - it was probably around the year 1010 but it is likely that he was buried at the Abbey, possibly in front of the abbey church altar.



IVORY DICE - SAXON

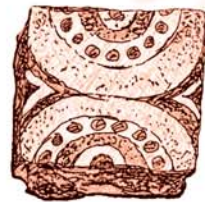


PARCHMENT PRICKER



GARGOYLE

FLOOR TILE



Directions

Although the first station you see may be the one in the market place, it is best to begin the tour in the car park of St Peter's Church, in front of the main display **Station 1**.

From there **Station 2** is 50 m away, just outside the car park entrance in Abbey Street, beside the entrance to Abbey Farm.

To follow the perimeter of the precinct, walk up Abbey Street to the corner of Acre End Street, (by The Jolly Sportsman). Turn left, and continue until you come to Station Road on your left, by The Swan Inn. Walk down Station Road for about 300 m until you see a small car park on your left, where you will find **Station 3**.

(A short cut can be taken by using Swan Street instead of Acre End Street)

From **Station 3**, follow the footpath through the abbey's fishponds area for about 250 m, until you come out into the playing fields. Keep on for another 100 m to find **Station 4**, on your right.

From **Station 4** continue around the sports pitch for 200 m to find **Station 5**.

From **Station 5** continue to the entrance to the village, about 400 m, until you see the market place on your left. There you will find **Station 6**.

RENEWAL

By the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, the abbey had declined, and for a time its very existence hung in the balance. There were plans to close it down, but eventually in 1109 King Henry I signed the charter renewing the abbey's foundation. The old abbey was demolished, and over the next century, a huge complex of buildings was constructed, dominated by a large church. The abbey church itself was not discovered during the archaeological excavations in the 1990s, but from what was found, we can be sure that the site of the church is almost completely covered by the present day graveyard of St Leonard's church. At its height the abbey would have housed about 40 monks, with numerous other abbey workers.

THE FLOURISHING ABBEY

Much of the known history of the abbey comes from the Cartulary, a collection of documents detailing the abbey's business and legal dealings. For example, in 1390 the total income of the abbey was £772 12s 10¼d, of which £348 came from rents. The rest came from the sale of wool or livestock. In 1406 the total income had risen to £812 10s 8½d. By comparison, the average yearly income for a farm worker was around £5.

An abbey cost a great deal to maintain, and like other religious houses Eynsham abbey owned land, manors and churches given by the king or the nobility. Most of these were in north and west Oxfordshire - places like Yarnton, Deddington, Milton -Under-Wychwood - but some were much further afield, like Histon in Cambridgeshire. Single properties in Eynsham were often bequeathed to the abbey, which then would rent them out to tenants. The rents were carefully recorded, and frequently took the form of certain items, or days of service on the abbey farm, rather than money.

Eynsham was unlucky in being so close to the King's hunting lodge at Woodstock. Frequently the King would hold court at the abbey. Providing for the King, Bishops, their retinues, advisors and courtiers must have put an enormous strain on the abbey's resources.

In the early 13th century, Abbot Adam sought to increase the abbey's prosperity by buying land to the south where he established the fishponds (by which the Trail leads), and creating a new borough ('Terra Nova' - 'New Land') to the north-east of the town.