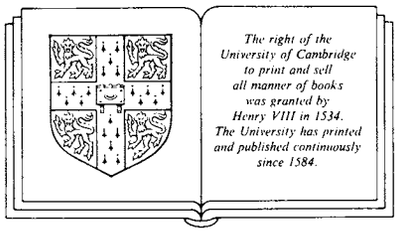
Norton Priory

Sandstone grave slab, found in the nave of the priory church, where it covered a wooden coffin. A tree of life, with oak leaves and acorns, grows from a cherubic face and is transformed into a cross.

The archaeology of a medieval religious house

Norton Priory

J. PATRICK GREENE



Cambridge University Press
Cambridge
New York *New Rochelle*
Melbourne *Sydney*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1989
First paperback edition 2004

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Greene, J. Patrick
Norton Priory: the archaeology of a medieval religious house/
J. Patrick Greene.
p. cm.
Bibliography
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 33054 8 hardback
1. Norton Priory (Norton. Cheshire) 2. Priories—England—Runcorn (Cheshire)—History. 3. Augustinians—England—Runcorn (Cheshire)–History. 4. Excavations (Archaeology)–England–Runcorn (Cheshire) 5. Runcorn (Cheshire)–Church history. 6. Runcorn (Cheshire)–Antiquities. 7. England–Antiquities. 8. Christian antiquities–England–Runcorn (Cheshire) I. Title.
DA690. N878G74 1988
936.2′715–dc19 87-27637

ISBN 0 521 33054 8 hardback
ISBN 0 521 60278 5 paperback

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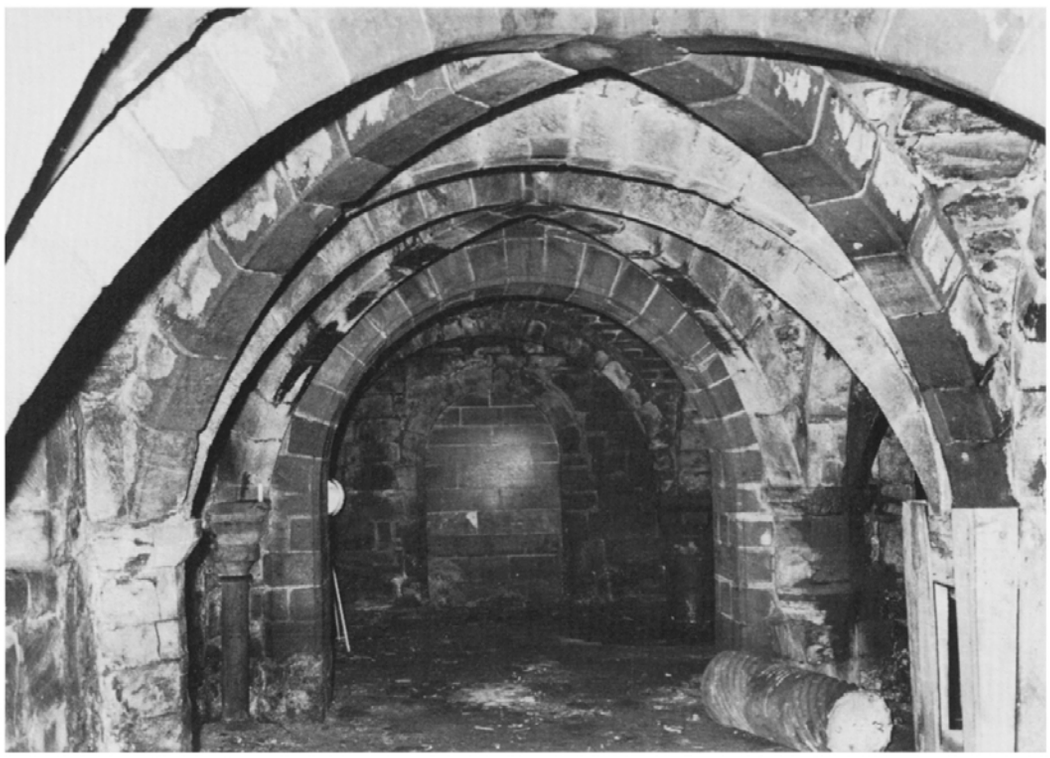
Fig. 2. Interior of the twelfth-century undercroft, before restoration, looking from the southern, rib vaulted bays to a dividing wall built in the thirteenth century, the door through which is blocked by nineteenth-century masonry.



Preface and acknowledgements

When I arrived at Norton Priory on 13 April 1971, it was to carry out a six-month excavation for Runcorn Development Corporation. The Development Corporation, engaged in the construction of a New Town, were keen to have a feature in the Town Park that would counteract the newness of their houses, factories, shops and roads. My expectation of the Town Park was very different from the reality. My preconception of neat municipal flower beds and carefully mown lawns through which elegant archaeological trenches might be sliced was shattered immediately. The parkland in fact consisted of some 200 hectares of fields and woods, with a canal. Norton Priory was concealed within these woods. The only structure that provided any reassurance that this might be an archaeological site was the sad remnant of a Georgian country house – just part of the basement, to which a Victorian porch had been added (fig. 1). Inside however, in the windowless gloom and decay, the heart beat faster. There was a magnificent, highly decorated, Norman doorway. Beyond that were three simple and attractive stone vaulted rooms – undoubtedly medieval (fig. 2).

The condition of the structure would have dismayed even the most ruin-hungry romantic artist. No tasteful wisps of ivy trailing over medieval tracery here – instead a battered Georgian shell around an eight hundred year old building that was now supporting (just) semi-mature trees that had become established on the 'roof', their roots infiltrating deeply the medieval lime mortar for their sustenance. The rich soil of what had once been gardens and pleasure grounds had now become a dense jungle of sycamore and *Rhododendron ponticum*.

During the previous summer Hugh Thompson, of the Society of Antiquaries, had penetrated the jungle with a dozen inmates from a local prison to cut a series of strategically placed trenches. These had revealed sufficient remains of walls to encourage the Development Corporation to go ahead with a larger investigation in 1971. That led to my six-month contract.

In fact, it was twelve years before I left Norton. That first season produced such exciting and rewarding results that the Development Corporation decided to press ahead with a large-scale excavation. The discovery of fine masonry walls, superb carved sandstone coffin lids, a remarkable mosaic tile floor, and a wealth of archaeological information generated widespread enthusiasm – not least in the prison workforce that carried out much of the work, with individuals who proved as adept at the intricacies of excavating human skeletons as they were at shifting huge quantities of garden soil and tree stumps.

The excavation eventually became the largest in area to be carried out by modern methods on any monastic site in Europe. As it proceeded, so too did accompanying historical and scientific research. To look into the past of such a little known archaeological site was, at first, to peer into a particularly dark and cloudy glass. As each season progressed, as the monastic buildings were gradually revealed, as each layer of soil was examined and removed, as each find was cleaned, identified and catalogued, as each historical reference to Norton was traced . . . so the image in the glass developed, at first faint and blurred, but then increasingly distinct and vivid. The image is of buildings being erected, embellished, enlarged, burning down, being repaired, being demolished and then replaced. It is of a landscape being shaped by the activities of its inhabitants, as subject to change as the buildings. Individuals also come into focus with all the variety, strengths and failings of humanity – pious, ambitious, corrupt, efficient, lax, violent, caring. In the pages that follow, some of these people will be introduced. Sometimes, through documents, we know their names, but others, although anonymous, are recognised by their craftsmanship and artistry with stone or clay.

Mortimer Wheeler was fond of saying that 'archaeology is nothing if it's not about people'. In the case of Norton, those people are not only the ones who are revealed by the archaeological and historical process. They are also people who, today, have contributed their labour to reveal the achievements of the past.

In the first season I was assisted in the direction of the excavation by Jan Roberts and in the second by Jennifer Laing. Subsequently Bevis Sale worked as assistant director throughout. His skills as surveyor and draughtsman were of particular value. Beryl Noake took responsibility for the finds, first as a volunteer, then as a full-time member of the team. Her role grew in importance as the quantity of finds and the amount of data accumulated.

From the beginning local volunteers were encouraged to participate and a skilled pool of helpers gradually developed (fig. 3). This group eventually became the

Norton Priory Society, a body which has given enormous assistance to the project in very many ways. In 1976 the first of a series of annual teaching excavations took place. They were open to all, organised in conjunction with the Institute of Extension Studies of Liverpool University. Peter Davey was instrumental in setting up the courses; he also provided assistance in a variety of other ways.

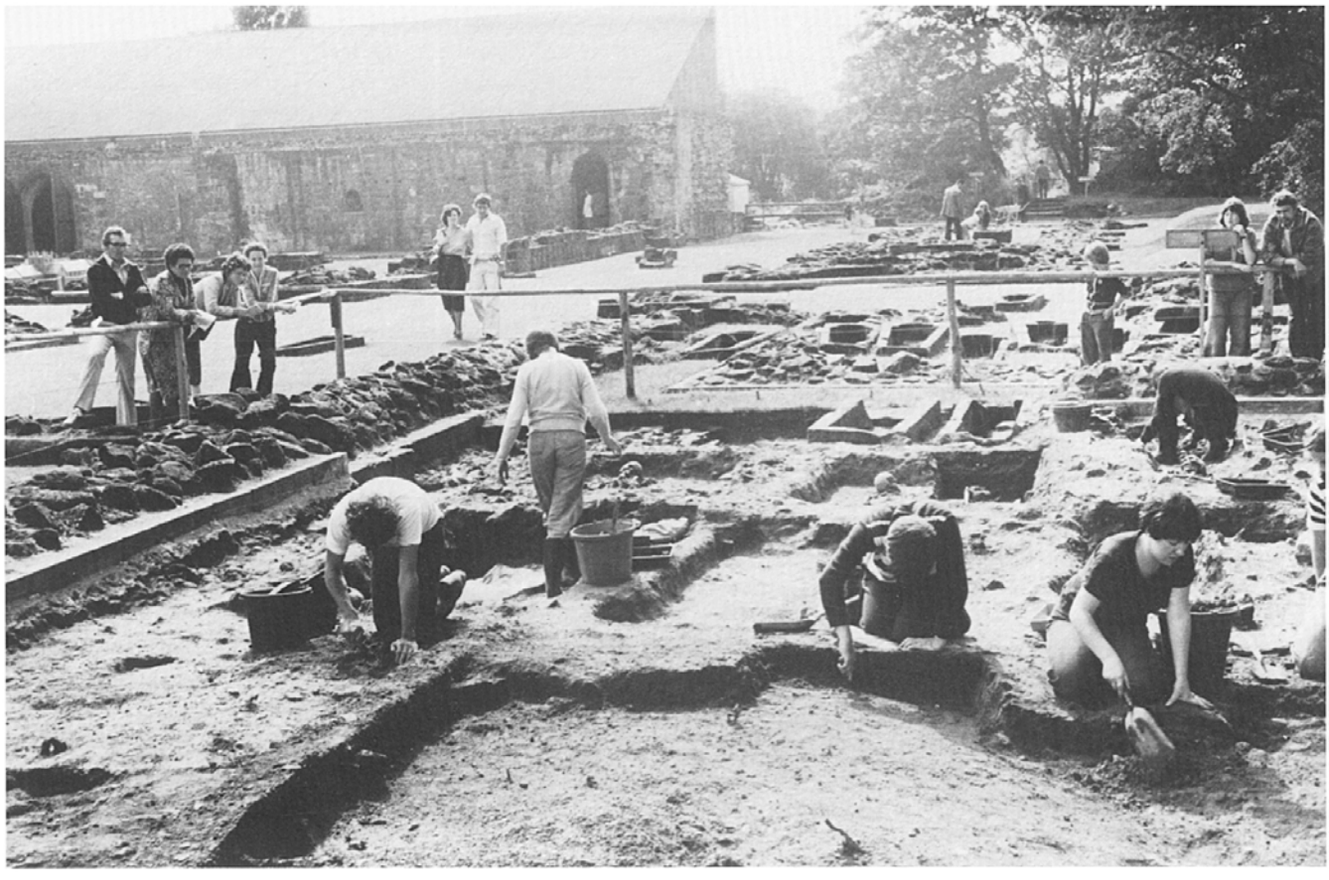
Runcorn Development Corporation, having initiated the project, backed it fully throughout. Roger Harrison, Chief Architect and Planning Officer, Derek Banwell and Ken Enderby, successive General Managers, took personal interest. Vere Arnold, the Development Corporation's Board Chairman, became Chairman of the Norton Priory Museum Trust when it was established in 1975. Other support came from a variety of educational establishments, research bodies and commercial companies whose contributions are acknowledged in the text. In the writing of this account my particular thanks are due to Dr Lawrence Butler of Leeds University for advice, criticism, and encouragement.

Fig. 3. Excavation in progress on the north east chapel in 1977. Visitors are watching the work from the site of the church; beyond is the west range undercroft.

Historical and archaeological research

Apart from a useful if idiosyncratic account of the history of Norton by William Beamont published in 1873, little historical research had been carried out prior to 1971. This can be explained partly by the absence of any surviving documentation for the priory. No cartulary (volume of charters) exists. From the outset it was clear that historical research had to complement archaeological excavations; both have been pursued by the writer. The research has consisted of spreading the net as widely as possible for references to Norton in documents and published sources. As a result, the many small pieces of information that have been amassed have gone some way to redressing the lack of Norton's own archive. The extent to which the evidence of documents and of archaeology have complemented one another has been particularly satisfying.

In the chapters which follow, the role of archaeology in investigating and elucidating the history of a little known monastic house will be described. Archaeology is here used in the sense of the broadly based discipline which it has become. Thus excavation and the evidence of artefacts provide only part of the material for study. Examination of structures and architectural details; scientific analysis of artefacts, plant and animal remains and soils;



study of landscape from the air and on the ground – all these and many other techniques are part of the investigative process. There is no artificial divide between these and what might be conventionally considered as 'historical' sources of information such as written documents, maps and plans. The collection and correlation of evidence from as wide a spectrum of sources as possible provide the best means of investigating Norton Priory.

The rediscovery of Norton Priory

The product of so many people's hard physical labour, methodical recording and analysis, and intellectual detective work, is a series of images of Norton Priory and its inhabitants. In the pages that follow the evidence will be set out, and interpreted. The story starts with the foundation of a priory at Runcorn in 1115 by a wealthy, powerful Norman, William fitz Nigel, baron of Halton. His son moved the Augustinian canons to Norton – a much more suitable location – in 1134. A dramatic growth in

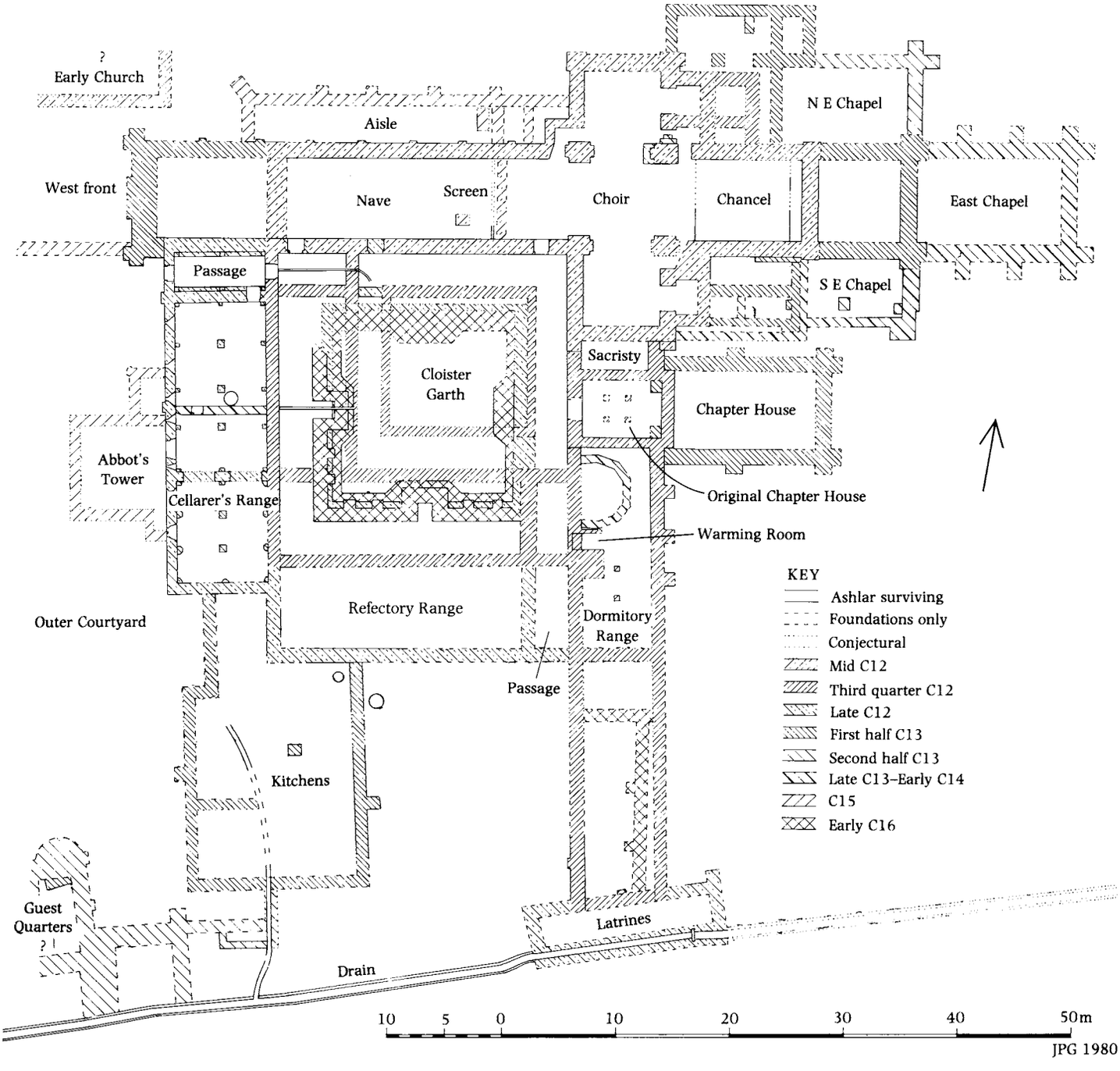


Fig. 4. The development sequence of the medieval priory.

the priory's possessions followed, fuelled by the piety and spiritual self-interest of the barons and their principal feudal lieutenants, the knights of the Dutton family. The priory became not only a place for prayers for the souls of deceased benefactors, but also the resting place of their mortal remains. The creation of a wonderful mosaic tile floor for the church can be linked with the Duttons' desire for embellishment of their burial chapel.

The landscape of Norton was profoundly affected by the ownership of the entire, extensive manor by the priory. The impact on the marshland of the Mersey, the woodland, villages, fields and roads was considerable. A picture of its appearance in the late medieval period begins to emerge. Equally fascinating is the way in which the products and resources of the manor were exploited – stone for the buildings, animals and crops to feed the canons, water for the kitchen and drains, for example.

The possession of large, productive land holdings gave the priory wealth and prestige. Mismanagement could nonetheless cause considerable problems, and the fortunes of the house fluctuated. Priors played an important role beyond the cloister. A high point was achieved in the late fourteenth century, when the priory was elevated to the status of an abbey, with the abbot entitled to wear a mitre. The credit for this unusual distinction for an Augustinian house can be found in the character and ambition of Prior Richard Wyche. By the time of the Dissolution, however, the activities of some of the canons, acting as vicars in neighbouring parish churches, was causing scandal. This provided one of the pretexts for closing the abbey – an event which itself was accompanied by circumstances that are lurid in their detail.

Discussion of the buildings of the priory (fig. 4) forms a substantial part of this book. This is the sort of information that archaeology is so good at revealing. It is possible to see how the very first buildings at Norton were erected – and to work out how the master mason set out the plan on the ground. Temporary wooden quarters for the canons were found. The dramatic expansion of the buildings is documented. The wonderful carved stonework is described – and the origins of the master masons are investigated. A disastrous fire, the drama of casting a bell for the church, the creation of the mosaic tile floor – all these were revealed by the excavation. The opportunity to excavate a site such as Norton on a large scale over the dozen years that the project took reveals so much. How fortunate it was that this site was not the victim of a hurried rescue excavation in the face of an advancing bulldozer. Instead, the foresight of Runcorn Development Corporation enabled the remains to be restored, the site to be landscaped, and the surrounding woodland gardens to be re-established for the benefit of the public. The creation of a site museum by the Norton Priory Museum Trust ensured the preservation of the information derived from the excavation, and its presentation to the public in attractive exhibitions. Today, tens of thousands of people are drawn to visit Norton Priory every year. How the twelfth-century founders would have appreciated such pilgrimage.