THORPE HAMLET HISTORY GROUP

Article16 : ST. LEONARD'S PRIORY
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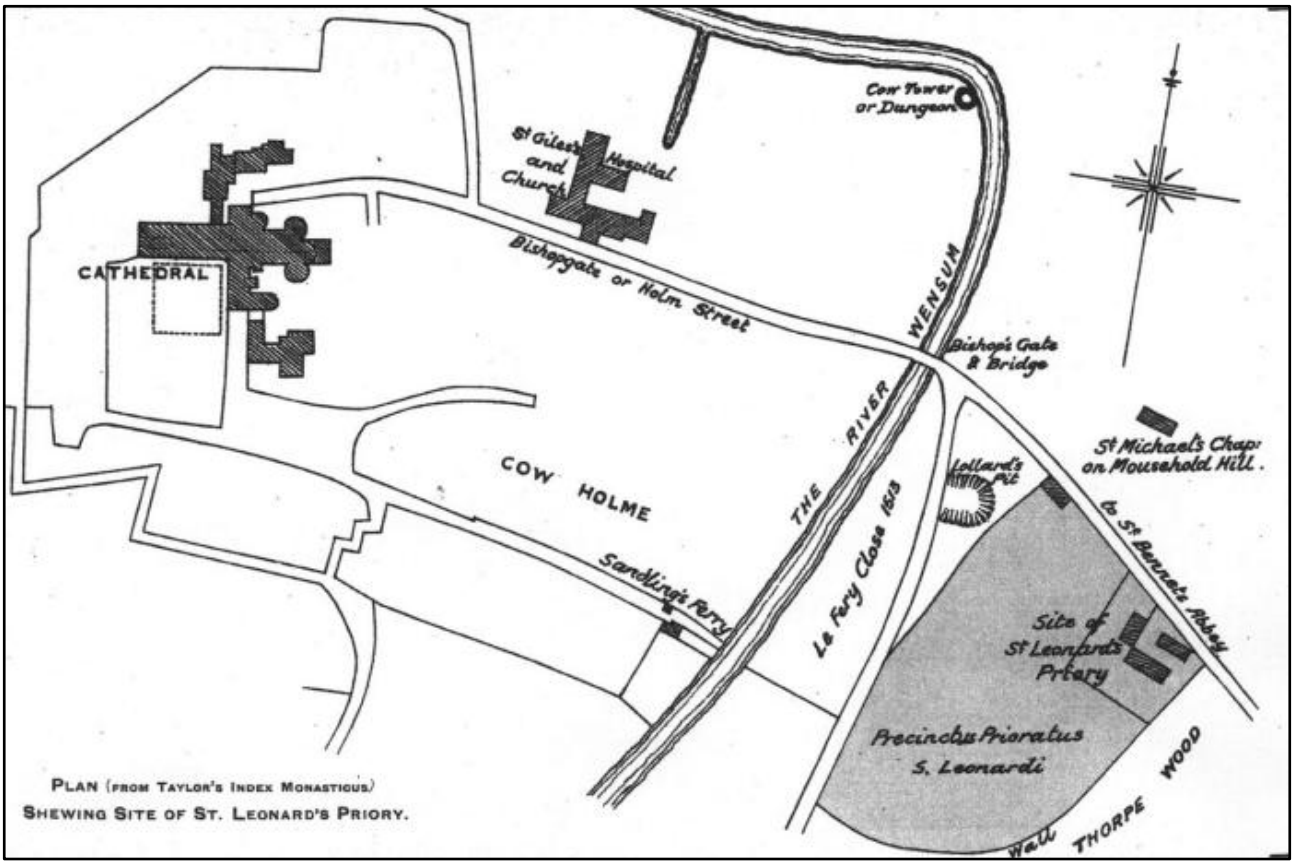
On the top of a hill in Thorpe Hamlet, and hidden from view on a private site, are the remains of a Norman priory. The cathedral records show that in 1101 Henry I granted Bishop Herbert de Losinga the Manor of Thorpe and Thorpe Woods. This domain covered about fourteen acres of extensive woodland and formed an area which encompassed what is now known as Gas Hill and Kett's Heights.

The Norman Bishop, Herbert de Losinga, who founded Norwich cathedral in c1096, built a Benedictine priory on the land at the top of Gas Hill, on the left-hand side facing the city. It was dedicated to St. Leonard, a French nobleman, who became the patron saint of all prisoners, captives and slaves, and was built initially as temporary accommodation for the monks until the cathedral buildings were completed. It seems that St. Leonard's priory was built five years or so after the work on the cathedral had started and that as the work on the building was going more slowly than anticipated extra accommodation was needed for the monks. Also, of course, it was highly visible, built high on a hill overlooking Norwich and provided a visual reminder of Norman authority in the area. Losinga later gifted St. Leonard's priory to the cathedral and seven or eight monks remained there permanently when it became a cell of the cathedral priory.

The monks performed daily services at the nearby chapel of St. Michael on the Mount, built part way down the hill, about two hundred yards away on the opposite side to the priory, on what is now known as Kett's Heights. An area of woodland was cleared to enable them to site the chapel on this spot. Losinga built this small chapel c1109 to replace the Anglo-Saxon St. Michael's church on Tombland which had been demolished in order to make room for the cathedral. It is thought that building the chapel close to St Leonard's Priory was a way of removing the church's Anglo-Saxon links from the area of the cathedral by placing it outside the city limits and under Norman control.

The monks would have kept in daily contact with the mother house by crossing the river at Bishop's Bridge and following the track up and down the hill to the cathedral priory. In 1514 the prior of St. Leonard's was accused by the bishop of not keeping the accounts in order and neglecting the upkeep of the buildings. The prior complained that having to climb up and down (Gas) hill twice a day was time consuming and tiring, and left him little time to carry out all his duties.

According to the Paston Letters new windows were bequeathed to the priory in the mid to late fifteenth century, when it is thought that the priory became a popular place of pilgrimage. The image of King Henry VI in St. Michael's Chapel and the bejewelled image of St. Leonard in the priory are thought to have 'brought in a good round annual sum' and also possibly attracted other pilgrims who passed by on their way up the hill on



This plan was made by Richard Taylor (1789 - 1851) and appeared in his Index Monasticus, published in 1821.

This copy was reproduced by W. T. Bensly in his article on 'St. Leonard's Priory, Norwich' in Norfolk Archaeology Vol. XII , (1895), p190.

their way to the shrine at St. Benet's Abbey.

After Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in 1538 the king granted the priory site and domain to Thomas, Duke of Norfolk. In this way the former dependent cell of St. Leonard's and the cathedral's share of Thorpe Woods passed permanently out of the hands of the Dean and Chapter of Norwich cathedral. The Duke of Norfolk's son, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey built a 'sumptuous' mansion on the priory site, which he called Mount Surrey. (Not to be confused with the town house called Surrey Court he built in what is now known as Surrey Street.) However he did not live long enough to enjoy it, for after falling out of favour with Henry VIII, he was beheaded in 1547.

Two years later in 1549 Robert Kett and his rebels camped on the hillside over looking the river and the city, and Kett set up his headquarters in St. Michael's chapel. The mansion built by the Earl of Surrey which had been empty since his execution, was used to hold Kett's more important prisoners and resulted in extensive damage to the Mount Surrey house, from which it never recovered. However St. Leonard's Priory, which had been demolished in 1538, was already a ruin before Kett and his troops occupied the site, and the remains of the building would have already been plundered for stone and other valuable building materials. Unused since the dissolution St. Michael's chapel suffered a similar fate and fell into total ruin. Only a flint wall remained which was the subject of a

painting by John Sell Cotman in 1810.

Unfortunately little is known about the layout of the priory buildings although it is said some remains were still visible above ground at the beginning of the 20th century. Very little interest seems to be shown in the remains of the priory, until 1899 when Walter Rye, a famous antiquarian, purchased the house called St. Leonard's Priory, which had been built on the site in about 1831. Rye was very interested in the history of the priory and carried out some excavations in 1904 which uncovered the west side of a gatehouse and the remains of an early fifteenth century library, chapel and dormitory.

A survey of the site was carried out by Bradford University in 1977 when the house built around 1831, on what was thought to be the priory graveyard, was being demolished. The clearance of the undergrowth on the site provided an opportunity to study the state and preservation of any remains of the priory. They found that the most of the site had been levelled and today all that remains are two mounds of masonry which consist of the east end of a building and the west wall of the gatehouse, as well as a possible boundary wall located near the southern edge of the site. Two modern houses now stand on the priory site, giving them one of the finest panoramic views of the city.

There is however a permanent reminder in Thorpe Hamlet that a Benedictine priory once stood at the top of Gas Hill. St. Leonard's Road runs from the junction of Quebec Road and Wolfe Road and curves down to the top of Gas Hill and then follows the boundary of what was the priory precinct on its way down to Rosary Road.

