

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

THE LOST CHAPEL OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, PALGRAVE

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INTRODUCTION

THIS STUDY SETS out to record the history of a small pre-Conquest chapel, St John the Baptist, Palgrave. There is little extant evidence about the chapel, but it is probably referred to in the Domesday Book, whilst other occasional references in charters, wills and at the time of the Reformation testify to its existence. Starting in the Saxon period, this study explores geographical connections, places the chapel within an historical context, and illustrates connections with known individuals in a secular and non-secular social context over a period of some 1500 years.

The exact location of the chapel has been lost since it was first recorded, although suspicion has long been that the location might have been associated with what is known today as St John's House. This site is situated on Lion Road, about a mile west of the village of Palgrave. It is on the higher ground and overlooks the land sloping away gently to the south (Fig. 139).



FIG. 139 – Location of St John's, Palgrave (1904 Ordnance Survey map reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland).

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Early references

The earliest possible reference to this chapel is in a 'private' charter of AD 962 made during the time of King Edgar, by which Wulfstan granted four hides of land at Palgrave, Suffolk, to St Edmund's Abbey.¹ It should be noted that in his work on the charters of King Edgar, Simon Keynes suggests that this particular charter is, 'Spurious, but with elements of formulation and witness-list drawn from a charter of 963'.² Notwithstanding Keynes' caution, this grant is of a substantial amount of land, some 480 acres, and it seems plausible to suggest that this charter records the creation of the chapel dedicated to St John the Baptist, just to the west of the village of Palgrave.

The Wulfstan referred to in the charter is likely to have been Wulfstan of Dalham, an agent of the king, who was active as a reeve from c.943 to 975. In Anglo-Saxon England a reeve was a powerful individual with local responsibilities under the Crown, often as a chief magistrate of a town or district. The period during which he is recorded as being active suggests that Wulfstan could have acted as reeve to any one or more of the three kings: Eadred (who reigned from 946–55); Eadwig (955–9); and Edgar (959–75).

In the monastic reform movement of the later Anglo-Saxon period, three saints applied much effort within the Benedictine religious houses to bring stricter observance into being, in line with similar reforms in other parts of Europe. This reformation commenced around 964 and was led by St Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester 963–84, St Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury 959–88, and St Oswald, archbishop of York 971–92. Both St Dunstan and St Æthelwold were close advisors to King Edgar the Peaceful and when Æthelwold brought regular monks to replace the secular canons at the Old Minster at Winchester in 964, it is noted that he was backed up by an agent of the king, Wulfstan of Dalham, the king's thegn or royal reeve in the Fenland shires who used his 'royal authority' to remove the canons.³

In East Anglia, Bury St Edmunds was chosen as the site for a major Suffolk Benedictine monastery. At Bury there was already a small collegiate minster that had origins from the early years of the tenth century, and where the relics of St Edmund, the last English king of East Anglia, martyred in 870 by the Danes, were enshrined during the reign of King Athelstan (924–39). The endowments for Bury had been growing steadily during the tenth century, but Bury was not firmly established as a monastery until 1020 when King Cnut granted a charter for the founding of the abbey and the secular canons were replaced by Benedictine monks.

Given this context, it seems highly plausible that the Wulfstan referred to in the charter of 963 is Wulfstan of Dalham, and that this grant of land at Palgrave to St Edmund's Abbey marks the foundation by Wulfstan of the chapel of St John the Baptist. In this connection it is worth noting that Wulfstan of Dalham was active elsewhere in East Anglia, being a benefactor of Ely abbey, and also acting as proto-sheriff for Cambridge. It is also worth highlighting Wulfstan's association with Eye. It is recorded that Wulfstan of Dalham acquired land at Eye albeit that this was an abuse of his position and the land was gained 'through the lies of the priest and [*the expenditure of*] a small amount of money'.⁴ Eye was also the location of Eye Priory, a small priory which was also Benedictine, and which was linked with Bernay Abbey in Normandy, founded in c.1080. Eye is just some ten miles east of Palgrave.

In the Domesday Book there is an entry for the settlement of '*Palegraua*', located in the hundred of Hartismere and the county of Suffolk, with a recorded population of fifty-eight households.⁵ The tenant-in-chief and lord in 1086 is listed as the abbey of Bury St Edmunds and the entry records the existence of two churches with thirty acres and half a plough. The Domesday Book does not give further details, nonetheless, one of these churches will have

been the main church in the village, dedicated to St Peter. The identity of the second is unknown, however, in their supplement to H. Munro Cautley's *Suffolk Churches*, John Blatchly and Peter Northeast suggest that this may have been the later chapel of St John the Baptist.⁶

In 1270 the advowson of St Peter's church fell vacant following the resignation of the rector Otto de Grandison (a noted curialist servant of Henry III and a crusading knight).⁷ The chapel of St John the Baptist which, at this time was dependant on the church, had become the focus of pilgrimages, since miracles were alleged to have taken place there and Gransden suggests that the care of poor pilgrims may have become something of a problem.⁸ This may have been the reason behind an apparent repurposing of the chapel by the abbot of Bury with a deed of Abbot Simon of Luton (1257–79) dated 25 October 1270, subsequently ratified by Prior Robert and the convent on 4th November 1271.⁹ The charter gave the consent of the convent and the bishop of Norwich (Roger Skerning (1266–78) to the creation of a community of five priests in the chapel at Palgrave. The deed is referred to by Gransden in her work on the history of the abbey:

The deed specifies that the new foundation was to be neither canonical nor monastic, but be called 'the chapel or house (*mansio*) of five priests serving God and the Blessed Virgin Mary'. It also served St John the Baptist, St John the Evangelist and All Saints. The priests were to celebrate mass daily for the Virgin Mary and three masses for the dead, besides matins and the other hours. They were to chant 'as was proper and at a moderate speed'. In church they were to be suitably dressed in surplices and black cloaks with round hoods. At other times they were to wear russet-coloured or brown hooded cloaks. The abbot was to appoint one of them as Master, who would be presented for institution to the bishop of Norwich. The Master had charge of discipline (though the abbot could punish or expel the incorrigible), and, if one chaplain died, he could appoint another, subject to the abbot's approval. The chaplains were to live communally with necessary, but not superfluous, servants, none of whom was to be a woman. If a chaplain became old or sick he was to be looked after for life and not replaced, unless the house could afford an extra chaplain. Alms were to be given to the poor daily, according as the house could afford.¹⁰

There are other references to the chapel in the following centuries. For example, there are a number of mentions to the chapel in wills from the period. In 1471/72 John Cotelyn of Palgrave listed in his will parcels of land to be sold by his executors, which included '1 acre lying among the lands of St John the Baptist'.¹¹ In 1473 Robert Smyth of Palgrave gave 6d to the reparation of the chapel of St John the Baptist.¹²

Reformation

However, the operation of the chapel was coming to an end. Under the Chantry Acts of 1545 (under Henry VIII) and that of 1547 (under Edward VI), chantries were abolished and their endowments disbursed. Much of their land was sold and the proceeds used to finance the war with France, but some was also granted to people favoured by this king. In 1545 lands belonging to the chapel and lying in Botesdale were granted to Francis Boldero of Pakenham and Robert Parker and it is hardly surprising that Boldero was one of the senior officials of Sir Francis Bacon, the Lord Keeper.¹³ Whilst Henry VIII's actions were focussed on the funds and lands of the chantries, the Act that Edward passed in 1547 was aimed at the complete suppression of the chantries and associated chapels. As part of this process, royal commissioners were appointed to survey colleges, chantries and kindred endowments. In their subsequent reports of these commissioners, St John's chapel was referred to as:

A free chapel, founder unknown. Incumbent Henry Cornwallis, gent, a layman. It is no parish church, but a chapel now decayed, half a mile from the parish church; £1 16s. 0d., arising from the rent of 36 acres. Yearly value £7 15s. 2d. Incumbent received £5 8s, 11d, Goods, a little white chalice weighing nine ounces.¹⁴

Post-Reformation

The chantry returns of the royal commissioners confirm that the chapel (and the immediate land on which it stood) had been transferred to Henry Cornwallis by the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁵

Subsequently, however, the site of the chapel becomes uncertain. It has generally been believed that it lay within the grounds of the present day St John's House in Palgrave. This land was previously owned by the Bateman/Kerrison family and, at some time during their ownership, some remodelling took place so that the site became a small landscape park with ornate gardens. In c.1740 a crinkle-crankle wall was erected to create a walled garden. The site was subsequently leased to the Harrison family in the second half of the eighteenth century, and later occupied by the Goodrich family until the 1950s. A house later built on the site was known as Park House, although the adjacent farm and associated buildings were consistently referred to as St John's Farm, and the house itself eventually became St John's House.

In 1721 the site of St John's chapel was visited by the Suffolk antiquary Thomas Martin, who was born in Palgrave and is frequently referred to as 'honest Tom' Martin of Palgrave. Martin recorded that part of the dilapidated structure of the St John's chapel, comprising the north and south walls of the nave were still pretty entire. Martin is not precise about his location, although from his description it would appear that he was to the north of the Palgrave to Wortham road, which then passed just to the south of the house and walled garden, and thus in the vicinity of the site which is now known as St John's.

The crinkle-crankle wall referred to above was built shortly after Martin's visit. If the site that Martin refers to as that of St John's chapel is the same as that around which the crinkle-crankle wall was built (i.e. the land now attached to St John's House), it is possible that the remains of the chapel walls were used as the foundations for the crinkle-crankle wall (Fig. 140). This would perhaps explain why the chapel walls which Martin reported as being relatively entire were never subsequently referred to by other writers.

The whole of the St. John's site lies on the higher ground in the area, with the land sloping away to the east and south so that if this is the location of the chapel of St John the Baptist (see below), the site was clearly chosen for its prominence. In the area where the crinkle-crankle wall was later built, this land also sloped gently towards the south. At some time, probably concurrent with the construction of the crinkle-crankle wall, some relevening was carried out within the walled area, building up levels by up to perhaps one metre at the southern edge of the walled garden so that this was then level with the ground at the northern edge of the walled garden.

Twentieth century and present day

Park House and its associated land was bequeathed to the Church of England Children's Society in 1955 by Miss Sarah A. Goodrich.¹⁶ Alterations and improvements were carried out and it became known as St John's Home (also referred to as the Goodrich Home). The home closed in 1970 and the buildings were subsequently used to provide residential accommodation for people with learning difficulties and similar requiring a variety of physically secure mental health care settings.



FIG. 140 – Crinkle-crankle wall, St John's House, Palgrave.

In the early 1990s Partnerships in Care Ltd acquired the site and in 1993 Richard Lyon and Associates Architects were appointed to undertake conversion of the early nineteenth-century stable block into a day centre, with reordering of the courtyard and the creation of a new car park. During this period, and in the various construction projects that took place in the twentieth century, no evidence of the location of the chapel was found.

In 2002 the same architects were appointed for the design of two new medium secure residential ward buildings on the part of the St John's site that was occupied by redundant and dilapidated farm buildings (Fig. 141). During preparation of the history of the site for planning application purposes, an aerial photograph of the site was acquired which had been taken in 1999. The aerial photograph showed what appeared to be the very faint outline of a building in the grassed area of the walled garden, appearing as 'crop marks'. The outline was rectangular, approximately 45ft long by 15ft wide, and on an east-west axis. The east end of this was semi-circular in shape. The marks were located towards the southern edge, i.e. the open side, and towards the eastern edge of the walled garden.

Planning consent for the new ward buildings was granted with the condition that an archaeological survey be carried out. This was undertaken in 2006 by the field team from Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service.¹⁷ The survey was limited to the area of farm buildings on the east of the site, comprising some 0.6ha, and was carried out following the removal of the redundant and dilapidated farm buildings. The excavation followed an evaluation which suggested that the hospital complex was the location of the medieval chapel of St John the Baptist, together with its probable range of ancillary structures, such as priests' residences, or other features such as associated burials.¹⁸

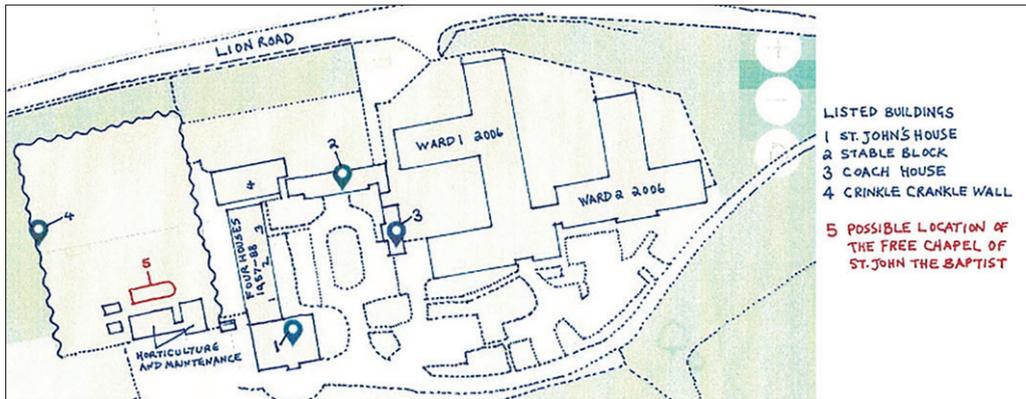


FIG. 141 – Site plan of St John's House, Palgrave prepared by Richard Lyon and Associates, Architects.

Unfortunately, the six evaluation trenches that were dug uncovered no evidence of any activity relating to the medieval chapel, although the subsequent report suggests that 'the probability remains that it lies beneath the current complex of buildings'.¹⁹ Indeed, the excavation recovered only three finds from the medieval period, consisting of a thirteenth-century silver Scottish penny, a lead plug for a vessel repair, and a late medieval copper alloy jetton.²⁰

Possible locations for the chapel of St John the Baptist

A subsequent investigation of LiDAR images and aerial photographs of the St John's House site did not reveal any details which might suggest that this was the location of the chapel, although this lack of evidence in itself does not disprove the idea.²¹ However, this does give cause to explore other possible locations for the chapel.

The Suffolk HER, PAL 003, suggests that the chapel 'is more likely to have been located within the grounds of The Priory' (possibly as a result of the disappointing outcome of the 2006 excavation).²² The Priory is a listed building with sixteenth-century origins located in the centre of Palgrave, near to the parish church of St Peter. However, the report of the royal commissioners appointed by Edward VI to survey colleges, chantries and kindred endowments refers to the chapel as being half a mile from the parish church. Whilst neither The Priory nor St John's House strictly match this description (The Priory is some 300 yards from the church, whereas St John's House is a mile), it seems plausible to suggest that the description is more likely to have been applied to a site some distance from the church, rather than to one close by.

In addition, despite its name, there is no evidence that The Priory ever operated as a religious institution, let alone a priory, and it is uncertain when the building was first given this name.²³ It may even be that the naming is as a result of some confusion with a priory which is known to have existed within the deserted medieval settlement of Great Palgrave in Norfolk, some forty miles north-west of Palgrave in Suffolk.²⁴ This small alien Priory of St Mary was founded as a cell of the Benedictine Priory of St Florent, Saumur, in 1123 and closed in c.1420.²⁵ The fact that the settlement no longer exists may have led to the assumption that references to a priory at Palgrave were to the continued settlement of Palgrave in Suffolk, rather than to a discontinued one in Norfolk.

It is also possible that the St John's site is not that of the chapel, but of a church. The

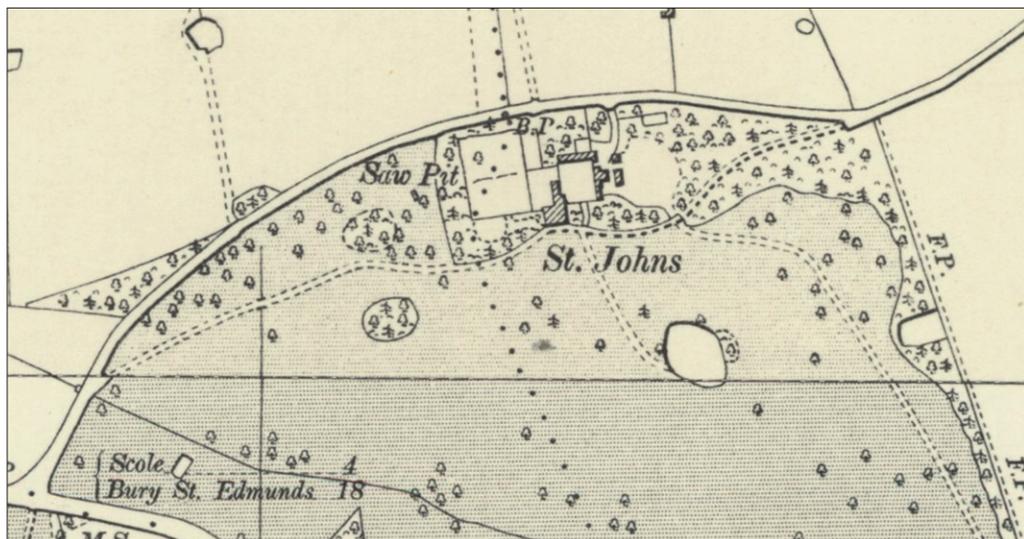


FIG. 142 – Details of 1904 Ordnance Survey map (reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland).

Domesday Book also records a second church in the neighbouring parish of Wortham. Investigations into its location were undertaken by Basil Brown within Wortham itself, but no conclusive evidence was found.²⁶ The St John's site is very close to the parish boundary between Palgrave and Wortham, indeed the detail on the 1904 Ordnance Survey map shows the boundary between Wortham and Palgrave parishes bisecting the walled garden area, diagonally from the north-east corner to the south-west corner, so it is possible that this is the site of the second Wortham church (Fig. 142).

CONCLUSION

Documentary evidence suggests that a religious institution which later became the chapel of St John the Baptist was founded in Palgrave a century before the Norman Conquest and continued to operate until the Reformation, a period of almost six hundred years. However, whilst the existence of the chapel is beyond question, its location is uncertain. The site of St John's House in Palgrave remains the most likely candidate, but there are other possible locations.

NOTES

- 1 C[ambridge]U[niversity]L[ibrary], MS Mm. iv.19, f.36v.
- 2 Keynes 2008, 76.
- 3 <http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=get&type=day&id=03120951>; Wulfstan of Winchester, *Vita Sancti Æthelwoldi*, c. 18, 32–33 cited in Robertson 2003, 63.
- 4 Williams 2008, 35.
- 5 Eleven villains, seventeen bordars, one slave and twenty-nine free men; Williams and Martin 2000, 193.
- 6 Blatchly and Northeast in Cautley 1982, 434.
- 7 Gransden 2015, 214.
- 8 Gransden 2015, 215.
- 9 For the foundation charter see CUL, MS Mm. iv.19, f.36v, and for the inspeximus and ratification

- by the bishop of Norwich, see CUL, MS Ff.ii.33, f.87, EEA 40, 7–8, no. 9. Both documents mention that miracles had occurred in the chapel.
- 10 Gransden 2015, 215.
 - 11 S[uffolk] A[rchives]/B[ury St Edmunds], IC 500/2/10 (Cotelyn).
 - 12 SA/B, IC 500/2/11 (Smyth).
 - 13 Redstone 1904, 32; MacCulloch 1978, 104.
 - 14 Redstone 1904, 32; the reference to the chapel as a ‘free chapel’, suggests that at its repurposing in 1270, the chapel became a chantry chapel formally exempt from the control of the abbey.
 - 15 Henry Cornwallis was elected to the second Edwardian Parliament and was the brother of Sir Thomas Cornwallis, High Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk and Privy Councillor, see <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/cornwallis-henry-1532-99> [accessed 13 February 2023].
 - 16 www.childrenshomes.org.uk/PalgraveWS/ [accessed 13 February 2023].
 - 17 Craven 2008.
 - 18 Craven 2008, 1.
 - 19 Craven 2008, 1.
 - 20 Craven 2008, 9.
 - 21 J. Rainer, pers. comm.
 - 22 <https://heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/Monument/MSF3943> [accessed 13 February 2023].
 - 23 Records exist of the priory of St Mary’s in Great Palgrave, Norfolk, together with similar records for a number of religious institutions close to Palgrave, Suffolk, such as the Eye Priory, Hoxne Priory, Gislingham Templar Preceptory. There is no such record for any religious institution called The Priory, in Palgrave, Suffolk, which suggests that it never operated as a priory.
 - 24 Now within the parish of Sporle with Palgrave, see <https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNF1058-Great-Palgrave-deserted-medieval-village> [accessed 14 February 2023].
 - 25 <https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNF4185-Site-of-Benedictine-Priory-Cell-Sporle-with-Palgrave&Index=3813&RecordCount=57339&SessionID=5ac1d964-f8d0-447f-b07e-00f6e1ba7ade> [accessed 18 May 2023].
 - 26 Smedley and Jarvis 1956, 118; Atkins 2015, 372–4.

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