

STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST NO 31

LITTLEMORE PRIORY

Asset/Monument Type: Nunnery.

Summary: Littlemore Priory was a 12th century foundation for religious women. It remained a small order throughout the medieval period and was eventually suppressed in the early 16th century. By the 17th century the site was privately owned.

Littlemore Priory is located to the south of Littlemore village on the south bank of the Northfield Brook. The full extent of the priory is uncertain and only a farmhouse, once the dormitory range and currently a public house, survives.

Location (NGR): SP54530228

Definition: A nunnery may be understood as a settlement built to sustain a community of religious women. Its main components, therefore, included provision for worship and subsistence. Their central morphological elements are the church and domestic buildings arranged around a cloister. In addition a second outer court and gatehouse may accompany the central cloister complex, the whole bounded by a precinct wall, earthworks or moat. Associated outlying features may include fishponds, mills, field systems, stock enclosures and barns.

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Key characteristics

The following criteria (which are not in any order of ranking), are based on the Secretary of State's criteria for assessing Scheduled Monuments. They should not be regarded as definitive, but as an indicative provisional assessment.

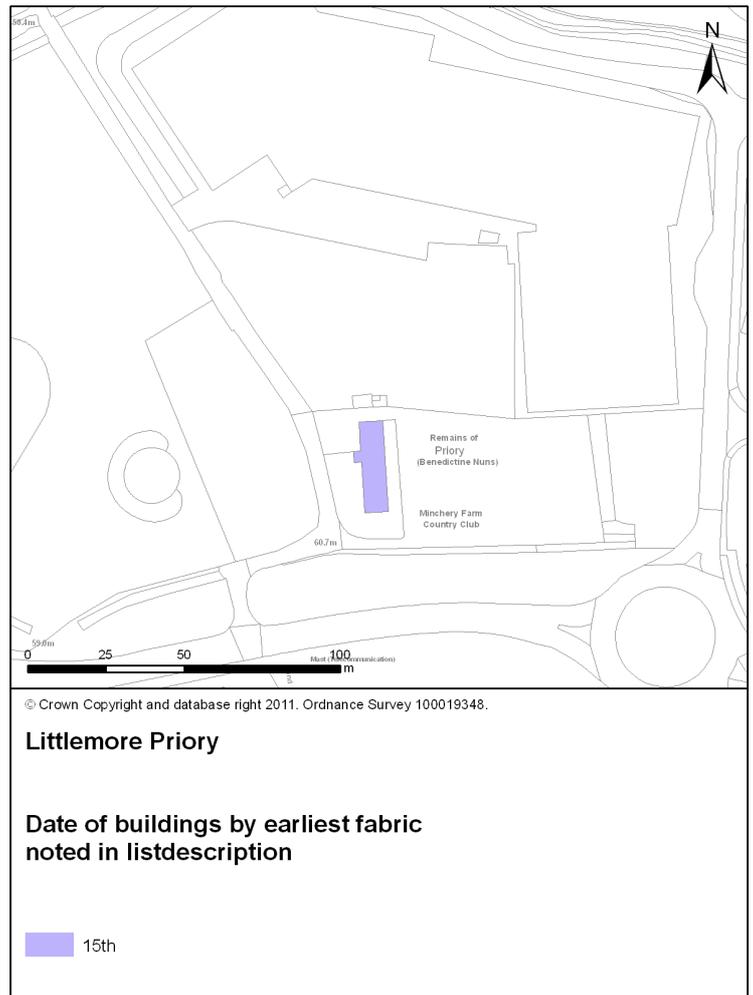
1. **Period:** Does the asset characterise a category or historic period?

Assessment: The Nunnery was occupied for over 400 years. Nunneries are just one of many asset types which characterise the medieval period.

Score: Medium

2. **Rarity:** What is the rarity of the asset in terms of regional and national context?

Assessment: Around 153 examples of nunneries are known from England, the majority of which date to the medieval period. Few survive as anything more than ruins however and still more are almost completely unknown beyond documentary references. A few nunneries date to the middle to late Saxon period, the greatest period of foundation occurring in the 12th century. Few nunneries survive as standing ruins.



Score: High

3. **Documentation:** *To what extent is the significance of the asset enhanced by existing documentation or lack thereof?*

Assessment: Previous archaeological investigation has largely been confined to peripheral zones of the priory. There is a reasonable amount of documentary evidence (VCH 1907).

Score: Medium

4. **Group Value:** *is the value of the asset enhanced by its association with related contemporary monuments or with monuments of different periods?*

Assessment: The site has limited group value, it forms part of a small group of 12th century sites in east Oxford. Following its Dissolution the priory became a farmhouse, owned by amongst others Cardinal College.

Score: Low

5. **Survival/Condition:** *What is the estimated level of above and below ground survival.*

Assessment: The farmhouse is the only surviving above ground feature and has seen extensive repairs since the medieval period. Previous archaeological investigation has suggested that below ground remains survive in reasonable condition.

Score: Medium

6. **Fragility/Vulnerability:** *susceptibility to change*

Assessment: The site has an current planning permission for partial development.

Score: High

7. **Diversity:** *Does the asset possess a combination of high quality features?*

Assessment: the form and size of standing and excavated nunneries suggest a great degree of variation in building construction, form, layout and orientation. At present the church and a cemetery may have been identified in addition to the dormitory range.

Score: Medium

8. **Potential:** *Is there a likelihood that currently unrecorded evidence can be anticipated?*

Assessment: Limited excavation in the area around the priory have indicated a reasonable potential for significant archaeological evidence in the area

Score: Medium

Overall score (17/24)

Overall Assessment of Archaeological Interest: High

HERITAGE ASSET DESCRIPTION

The Benedictine Priory of Littlemore at Minchery Farm was founded in around 1110 by Robert de Sandford, a knight of Abingdon Abbey. The priory appears to have remained small with an initial foundation of six virgates of land, by 1445 the house supported only a prioress, six nuns and three lay boarders (Pantin 1970: 19). The name Minchery Farm derives from the Saxon *mynece* meaning 'nuns' (Dudley-Buxton 1937: 120). In 1517 the priory is recorded as being in a ruinous state (VCH ii: 75). The priory was eventually suppressed in 1525 and at least part of the buildings became a farmhouse belonging to at first to Cardinal College but eventually ending up in the hands of the Powell family based at the Preceptory at Sandford-on-Thames. Little now survives except the 15th century dormitory range now in use as a pub (LB Ref 1/109 Grade II*).

A number of inhumations were recorded at Minchery Farm in the 19th century (Dudley-Buxton 1937: 120). The extensively repaired dormitory range was recorded by Pantin in

1956 (Pantin 1970) and was subject to a further Historic Building Assessment in 2003 (Oxford Archaeology 2003). Archaeological investigations in 1995 recorded a possible fishpond related to the priory (Booth 1995b). A series of archaeological investigations including evaluation, geophysical survey and geotechnical test pits were carried out near the farm in 1995 (RPS 1996a). No datable medieval features were recorded and only a fairly small amount of medieval pottery and tile was recovered. This included Brill/Boarstall and East Wiltshire wares (*ibid.*: 32). Subsequent investigations in 2001-2002 recorded a 13th century wicker lined pit, tentatively associated with the priory (RPS 2002: 14).

An archaeological evaluation on land immediately adjacent to the Priory building in 2004 recorded limited evidence for a robbed structure on an east-west alignment, with a north-south return. It was suggested by the excavator that this feature corresponds to the proposed location of the priory church (Taylor 2004: 8). If the structural evidence from this evaluation is indicative of the priory church, it would suggest a small structure similar to the early 12th century Norton Priory in Runcorn (*ibid.*). A possible graveyard was located to the north-east; no human remains were recorded but around ten possible grave cuts were noted. At least part of this graveyard had fallen out of use by the late medieval period, sealed by a possible medieval-late medieval ground surface identified in several trenches. A number of late medieval pits were subsequently dug into this ground surface containing late medieval pottery and domestic waste (*ibid.*: 29).

Further evaluation trenching in 2006 identified structural remains dated to the 13th century comprising of robber trenches, a well, hearth, floor surfaces including some medieval floor tiles, ditches, an area of worked stone and surviving walls (Williams 2006a). The structural remains were too piecemeal to reliably reconstruct a plan of the priory. A small assemblage of late 13th-14th century floor and roof tile were recovered. The lack of evidence for structures to the south-east and north-west of the extant range suggested that the priory was not extensive and that the extant building very likely forms the east range of a cloister on the south side of the Priory church.

Academic statements

MPP Class Description, English Heritage, 1989:

“In selecting examples of national importance an attempt should be made to identify a variety of site types and situations, examples with differing proportions of standing remains and sites prioritised by reference to their historical descriptors. All sites which originated as pre-Conquest houses are noteworthy, as are those which belonged to orders with few nunneries (Cluniac, Premonstratensian, Dominican, Franciscan, St John of Jerusalem). In addition, any examples of nunneries converted from monuments of another function (in particular, male monasteries) should be examined in order to assist in the recognition of morphological traits specific to nunneries. The sample should also include sites of short-lived or unsuccessful occupation, so that stages of development may be classified.”

Research agenda

- Can we establish the plan of the Priory/Nunnery and the character and extent of its buildings and cemetery/s? What are the similarities and differences with other recorded contemporary examples of its monument class. Can morphological traits specific to nunneries be identified?
- Can we learn more about the daily life within religious institutions – the diet and health, daily routine?

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- Can the material culture and architecture of the site tell us about the relative wealth and functions of rival orders and the status of women in society?

Associated Monuments

OHER 1434: Minchery Farmhouse. Medieval nunnery, cemetery, house, cloister

Associated Events

- *Building recording, Littlemore Priory, 1956*: Surviving dormitory range recorded by Pantin
- *Excavation, Blackbird Leys, 1995*: Fishpond recorded, possibly related to the priory
- *Excavation, Oxford Football Stadium, 1996*: Fairly low spread of medieval pottery and tile was recovered including Brill/Boarstall and East Wiltshire wares
- *Watching brief, Minchery Farm 2002*: 13th century wicker lined pit, tentatively associated with the priory
- *Building recording, Minchery Farm, 2003*: recording of Minchery farmhouse
- *Excavations at Kassam Stadium, 2004*: Possible evidence of the church buttress suggesting a small structure reflecting the small size of the priory. Possible graveyard also indicated although no human remains recovered several grave cuts were identified.
- *Excavation, Minchery Farm paddock, 2006*: structural remains dated to the 13th century comprising of robber trenches, a well, hearth, floor surfaces including some medieval floor tiles, ditches, an area of worked stone and surviving walls. The structural remains were too piecemeal to reliably reconstruct a plan of the priory however although a small assemblage of late 13th-14th century floor and roof tile were recovered. The lack of evidence for structures to the southeast and northwest of the extant range suggested that the priory was not extensive and that the extant building very likely forms the east range of a cloister on the south side of the Priory church

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