

VII: Norton Priory 'Monastery to Museum'

by Lynn Smith*

Norton Priory Museum houses the finds from one of the most extensively excavated monastic sites in Europe. Opened in 1982, by 2010 the building was no longer fit for purpose and the collections were under threat. A major grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund made possible an ambitious reconstruction on two floors, adjoining and on top of the twelfth-century undercroft. This has permitted the display of a much greater number and wider range of objects covering the whole history of the site, including the post-Dissolution period, and its landscape setting. Interactive technology encourages visitors to engage with the lives of previous inhabitants and with the results of an active research programme.

Rediscovery, excavation and display

During the summer of 1970, Hugh Thompson of the Society of Antiquaries and a dozen inmates from a local prison arrived at Norton Priory to open a series of archaeological trenches. The site was known locally as having an old ruined building hidden by overgrowth with a beautiful, highly decorated archway inside with vaulted rooms. This gave some idea that the site might hide other areas of interest but no-one could really guess what Thompson's trenches would lead to. In fact, this first season's work revealed archaeology significant enough for the Runcorn Development Corporation to commission a larger project. The Corporation were building a New Town and wished to have a feature within the town park that would give the new residents a sense of history and place. Norton Priory provided the ideal opportunity.

Documentary research showed that the barons of Halton established a community of Augustinian canons in Runcorn in 1115; these moved to Norton in 1134. The religious community was a successful and powerful one, a fact that was recognised in 1391 when it became a mitred abbey. (It is possible that the twice-life-size statue of Saint Christopher statue was commissioned around this time). After the Dissolution of 1536 the Brooke family bought the estate, in 1545, and through the coming centuries modernised and rebuilt the remains of the abbey, creating a Tudor home, then a Georgian and latterly a Victorian house. The twelfth-century undercroft (originally a storage space with accommodation above for the abbot) was reused as the grand entrance to the later houses, and in the Georgian period

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III VII.1 The entrance to Norton Priory Museum built in 1982, seen here just prior to the start of the project in 2014. © The Norton Priory Museum Trust

even wine bins were constructed in one of the vaulted rooms. During the 1770s, after a bitter dispute, the Bridgewater canal was cut through the estate. In the 1920s the Brooke family decided to settle in Abberley in Worcestershire: the contents of the Norton Priory house were sold off, and most of the building pulled down in 1928. The statue of Saint Christopher stood in the overgrown gardens until it was moved to Liverpool Museum for safety in 1964 (Greene 1989; Brown & Howard-Davis eds 2008).

Dr Patrick Greene OBE was the director of excavations from 1971, followed by Bevis Sale. Hundreds of local volunteers became involved, and from 1976 a series of teaching excavations began in conjunction with the University of Liverpool. The excavations ran until 1987, backed throughout by the Development Corporation, and Norton became arguably the most extensively excavated medieval monastic site in Europe (Greene 1989; Brown & Howard-Davis eds 2008). By the mid-1970s it was clear that the excavations were producing amazing results and that the site and the finds would need long-term care, so in 1975 the Norton Priory Museum Trust was formed. The Trust built the first museum on site, adjacent to the consolidated remains of the priory, in 1982 (III VII.1). Norton Priory Museum and Gardens still runs as an independent charitable trust with major support from Halton Borough Council. The site extends over forty-two acres and includes not only the twelfth-century undercroft, the statue of Saint Christopher and the extensive excavated remains, but also a two-and-a-half-acre Georgian walled garden, a specially commissioned sculpture trail, the National Collection of Tree Quince, a section of the Bridgewater canal, a Georgian summer house, an ice house and a section of a ha-ha wall. All these features sit

alongside more than 90,000 archaeological artefacts comprising thirty-three different types of material and illustrating the site's occupation from 1134 through to 1536 by the Augustinian canons and then the post-medieval occupation by the Brooke family until they left the estate in 1928.

The need to improve

Whilst the museum building, constructed from unsealed breeze blocks and with a flat roof, had served the Trust well over its lifetime, by the early 2000s it was clear that it was becoming unfit for purpose. It was cold and uncomfortable, with failing visitor facilities. The roof was leaking badly, the displays were tired, less than 1% of the collection was on display, and the objects that were on display did not represent the best or the variety of the collection. Access to a small viewing platform within the roof space of the undercroft was only possible via a spiral staircase, the roof itself had become unrepairable, and the Victorian tiled floor that decorated the interior was subsiding and cracking. The museum store was also full to capacity and suffered from a poor environment.

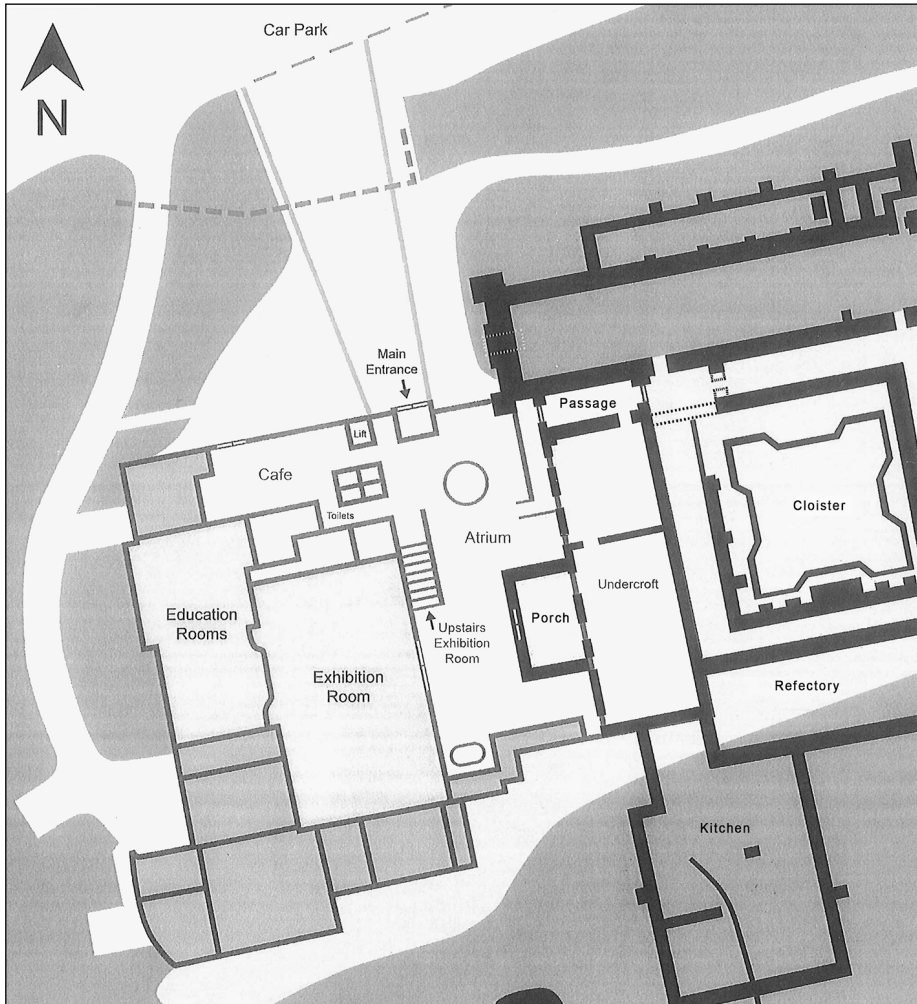
During the autumn of 2010 during a routine condition check, mould was discovered on the stored objects – a result of the poor and uncontrollable environment. After a rapid assessment of the entire store it was discovered that the outbreak was quite severe with boxed objects, the boxes themselves and the shelving all being affected. The relative humidity had peaked at 85%, and despite installing dehumidifiers, fans etc the situation could not be improved. Eventually the stored collection had to be evacuated to an off-site facility, and as the environment within the gallery had also deteriorated the most vulnerable material was taken off display. A comprehensive programme of cleaning and conserving the entire collection and replacing all of the 2000 archive boxes began. There was now an urgent need for investment.

In addition, in 2011 a market research exercise showed that there was clear potential to achieve a significant increase in visitor numbers, making the Trust more economically sustainable and contributing to the economy of a significantly deprived area. It was also to form the basis for thinking about a new interpretation and activity programme.

A new vision and a new museum

A final-round bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund entitled 'Monastery to Museum' succeeded in 2014, coinciding with the nine-hundredth anniversary of the priory's foundation and the fortieth anniversary of the Trust. The architects Buttress and the exhibition designers Mather and Co had an extensive remit: to preserve the medieval building and reuse the footprint of the 1980s museum whilst creating a new build in the space between the latter and the undercroft. The ambition was to increase visitor numbers greatly by providing twenty-first-century facilities and experiences. The front of the museum would be brought forward in line with the northern end of the undercroft to become the new entrance/shop and Brooke Café. The available display space would increase by approximately 55% to 1000 m², by having both a ground-floor gallery and, for the first time, a full-length first-floor gallery on top of the undercroft, allowing four times the number of objects to go on display. The first-floor gallery, fully accessible by a new lift as well as stairs, would allow an improved view of the full extent of the ruins and explain the various rooms and spaces within the monastic

complex and how the undercroft had survived and been encapsulated within the post-medieval houses. The twelfth-century passageway, used for centuries by visitors to Norton Priory but blocked up for decades, would be reopened and ramped to give easy access from the museum to the outdoor remains (Ills VII.2–3). The statue of Saint Christopher, internationally significant because of its colossal size and high-quality workmanship, would be relocated so as to take pride of place in the new atrium and the first thing visitors to the new museum would see. A new storage facility meant the entire collection could be returned, now clean of mould. The Heritage Lottery Fund provided the main financial backing for the project, which in total reached £4.5 million. Other significant funders included Garfield Weston, the Wellcome Trust and Halton Borough Council. Invaluable support was also provided by Historic England and the team at Cheshire Archaeology Planning Advisory Service within Cheshire Shared Services.



III VII.2 The ground-floor plan of the new museum and western end of the excavated remains.
© The Norton Priory Museum Trust



III VII.3 The new museum in 2016, seen from the north-east and showing the first-floor gallery above the undercroft. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust



III VII.4 The excavation in the area that was to become the new atrium, between the west wall of the undercroft and the old museum, showing the line of the terraces on either side of the porch that can be seen in photographs of the Victorian house. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust

Preparatory excavations

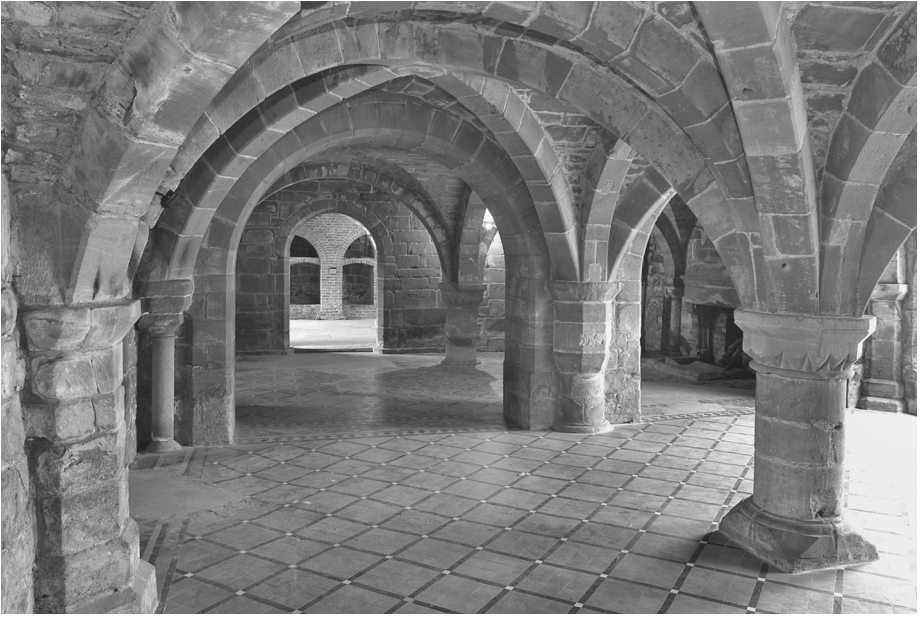
The status of the site as a Scheduled Monument meant that excavation would be required in advance of the construction of the new sections of the museum, even in areas that had been explored during the 1970s to 1980s, in order to establish the depth and character of any surviving archaeology. Within what would become the new atrium, a layer of sandstone rubble was found that was the sub-base of the pebbled surface giving access to the front of the Victorian house. The excavations also confirmed the location of the Abbot's Tower to the immediate north and south of the Victorian porch. To the north and west of the porch, buried beneath later twentieth-century landscaping, were the masonry foundations of low walls that provided the terracing seen in photographic and cartographic depictions of the west front of the remodelled Victorian mansion (Earthworks 2016) (Ills VII.4–5).

Conservation work on the undercroft began by recording the Victorian tiled floor in the southern bay and then lifting it in its entirety, with as much salvaged as possible to be relaid (Ill VII.6).

The reason that certain areas of the floor were sinking soon became apparent. The canons had built the undercroft walls and pillars on solidly constructed foundations, but the rectangular areas between them contained a very silty deposit that held a great amount of water. Although over time this had caused damage to the tiled floor, in the south-east corner the waterlogged deposits had also preserved a number of timbers. These comprised the fragmentary remains of a timber structure, consisting of several earth-fast posts set within short stretches of a narrow curvilinear trench that was traced for over nine metres running south to north-east (Ill VII.7) (Earthworks 2016). One of the posts was identified as a small part of a possible plank-and-muntin screen (typically constructed of a frame of large oak beams



Ill VII.5 The Victorian house built by the Brooke family, looking east and showing the terraces on either side of the porch. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust



above: III VII.6 The Victorian tiled floor in the southern bay of the twelfth-century undercroft prior to excavation. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust

left: III VII.7 Waterlogged timbers recovered in the undercroft and dated to the 1100s. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust

with panels in between) (Ian Tyers *pers comm*). Six samples were sent for dendrochronological dating, and one provided a felling date of 1161. As the site was established in 1134, these timbers add rare and important information for its chronological development and hint at the potential quality of other organic material still buried.

Another somewhat surprising and hitherto unencountered feature at Norton Priory was several striations containing a grey clay in the bottom layer below the tiled floor. These were interpreted as probable plough scars, possibly predating the earliest phase of the priory.

The void created by the excavation of the waterlogged layers was filled with hardcore and covered with a geotextile membrane to prevent the newly relaid floor from sinking in the future. Gaps in the tiles were replaced by identical new ones supplied by the original manufacturers at Craven Dunill Jackfield, still operating at Ironbridge, Shropshire.

The other areas subject to excavation in this latest programme of investigation had already been excavated in the 1970s and 1980s, so not many finds were recovered. Some residual and modern objects were found, however, such as clay tobacco pipe stems (one of which bears the highly decorated eighteenth-century oval ‘Chester’ stamp), some post-medieval bottle glass, six sherds of medieval pottery, an enigmatic lead disc and a quantity of pig bones.

The rich and varied overall finds collection had a new and unusual material category added during these excavations: 1970s food packaging, including crisp packets, bread wrappers (III VII.8) and powdered potato ‘Smash’ packets were mixed with other material discarded by the original archaeologists, making the ‘archaeology of archaeology’ a new line of study at Norton Priory!



III VII.8 Twentieth-century finds representing the ‘archaeology of the archaeologists’. © Earthworks Archaeology

The new displays

Even given the increase in display space, telling the nine-hundred-year story of Norton Priory in detail was always going to be a challenge. The market research showed that visitors were just as keen to hear about the post-medieval period of the site as they were about the medieval. Given that the strength of the collection is very much medieval, the post-medieval story had to be covered by both archaeological finds and some acquired social history material illustrating and explaining the Brooke family's occupation.

As visitors enter the new atrium (Ill VII.9) they are greeted by the giant statue of Saint Christopher (Ill VII.10). Projections onto the statue (funded by a grant from Arts Council England), make the statue come to life through the voice of Brian Blessed, who takes the visitor on a colourful journey through the statue's life and times.



Ill VII.9 The museum atrium, showing the Victorian porch and part of the undercroft, with the foundations of the Abbot's Tower to the left

In the atrium visitors can also take a look at objects that trace the main periods of the history of the site, starting with the excavations (illustrated by an excavation notebook and fragments of a bomb from the Second World War found on site and subject to a controlled explosion) through to the Augustinian canons (represented by a beautifully carved small sandstone head of a canon, complete with hood, tonsure and closely trimmed beard, once probably forming part of the cloister arcade decoration).

The interpretation needed to cover not only nine hundred years of history but also over forty-two acres, including the two-and-a-half-acre Georgian walled garden, the remains of the post-medieval gardens, and woodland features at the museum site. Peppered through the displays are photographs representing the wider site.



left: III VII.10 Statue of St Christopher, carved from red sandstone from nearby Windmill Hill

For obvious reasons the heaviest items are displayed on the ground floor. One complete side of the gallery is taken up by an ‘object wall’, which is a type of ‘storage on display’, where larger objects can be seen but with minimal interpretation. Pull-out drawers within the wall allow certain smaller objects to be changed more frequently, and large replicas (currently mostly of medieval coarse wares) show how some of the pottery sherds on display would have originally looked.

The history and archaeology of the site are presented in a series of interconnecting exhibition walls and ‘islands’ (III VII.11). These showcase the people who have lived and worked at Norton Priory, the variety of buildings and different architectural styles, the beliefs and traditions of those worshipping and living on site, how they lived and how they decorated their interior environment, both in the monastic setting and the grand post-medieval houses. The latest digital

technology showcases certain elements which really bring the people of Norton to the fore. One, a digital autopsy, shows researchers from the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University investigating the clues seen on a medieval skeleton which tell us about Paget’s disease of bone and a murder (*see* Curtis-Summers *et al* 2016). Within an exhibition funded by the Wellcome Trust, other diseases, conditions and traumas evident within the large skeletal collection are showcased, along with another digital interactive inviting the visitor to be a medieval herbalist and choose the correct plants and herbs to treat symptoms. Insights from modern-day people who have Paget’s disease of bone themselves and researchers using ancient DNA from the Norton skeletons illustrate how the archaeological collection is being used to shed more light on past lifeways. The stunningly carved stone medieval coffin lids, originally highly pigmented, can be coloured in by visitors through a touch screen that also explains some of the symbolism used and the status of the occupants as signified by the location of the burial within the ruins.

Throughout the first-floor gallery the interpretation links the interior exhibitions with the outside ruins and explains how the undercroft survived and its relationship with the changing buildings (III VII.12). The wider estate is represented by objects excavated from nearby Lodge Farm, which are displayed for the first time. Life at Halton Castle, whose barons founded the Norton Priory and which is now cared for by the Trust on behalf of Halton Borough Council, is illustrated by finds discovered by Robina McNeil during her excavations in 1987. There is now a clear view of the castle from the mezzanine over the main entrance to the museum.



III VII.11 The new ground-floor gallery. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust



III VII.12 View from north-eastern corner of the first-floor gallery, looking out across the remains of the nave of the priory church. ©The Norton Priory Museum Trust

The first-floor gallery also takes the opportunity to celebrate Norton Priory's natural history and the wider landscape. Pull-out drawers of insects, displays of taxidermy birds and digital interactives allow visitors to explore its vast biodiversity. Videos of the Trust's Ranger and volunteer ornithologist explain how Norton cares for the birds, bees, insects and mammals on site. How the walled garden features in the later history of the site is also explained, along with objects such as gamebooks and the effect of the construction of the Bridgewater canal through the Brooke estate.

Video is also used to explain the ongoing research and the behind-the-scenes curation. This sits alongside a display case specifically included to bring the results of the latest research to visitors instead of perhaps waiting for them to be published in an academic journal. Research has always been a key component of the Trust's mission, and the two new galleries draw heavily upon it. The current research framework is designed to maintain and generate new lines of enquiry into the site's past and acts as a means by which the interpretation can be changed and developed, creating interest for repeat visits. It is interdisciplinary and connects all the Trust's historical and archaeological assets to the academic world. It also endeavours to draw the archaeological information together with documentary and historical sources to add 'colour' and context.

Professor Paul Baines' (University of Liverpool) characterised Norton in 2010 as 'unique for having a site at which it is possible to imagine in realistic detail many centuries of lived community history. It is also a site that can act (as few can), as a model for interdisciplinary research covering several hundred years of history. The on-site museum, another rare aspect, could be developed to cater for the whole range of visitors from local residents to academics from around the world.'

This major capital development project has certainly been a step-change for Norton Priory Museum and Gardens. We hope that the ambitions and opportunities seen by Professor Baines and other supporters have now been achieved and that we are better placed to continue to develop and care for this important historic asset. Since the opening in August 2016 our visitors certainly seem to agree that Norton Priory is now indeed a visitor attraction fit for the twenty-first century, with the ability to move forward positively and continue the investigations into this fascinating historic gem.

Acknowledgements

In a project of this scale developing over years it would be impossible to list everyone who helped us achieve our goal, but I should like to mention here just a few: Earthworks Archaeology, Historic England, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Wellcome Trust and our other funders, Halton Borough Council and our dedicated team of staff, volunteers and trustees, and of course our visitors.

Information for visitors

Norton Priory Museum and Gardens, Tudor Road, Manor Park, Runcorn, Cheshire are open every day (except for two weeks after Christmas) 10am–5pm from April to October and 11am–4pm November to March. Directions: M56, Junction 11; Sat Nav WA7 1BD. Contact: email: info@nortonpriory.org; tel 01928 569895. For further information *see* www.nortonpriory.org. Admission charges apply.

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