

WENDLING ABBEY—A NOTE ON THE SITE

By R. M. BUTLER

IN December 1957 it was feared that the earthwork remains of Wendling Abbey, 3 miles west of East Dereham, were likely to be destroyed. Consequently they have now been surveyed for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England).¹ This note has been written to record the present state of the site, since no modern account is available and the only published plan was made in 1810.

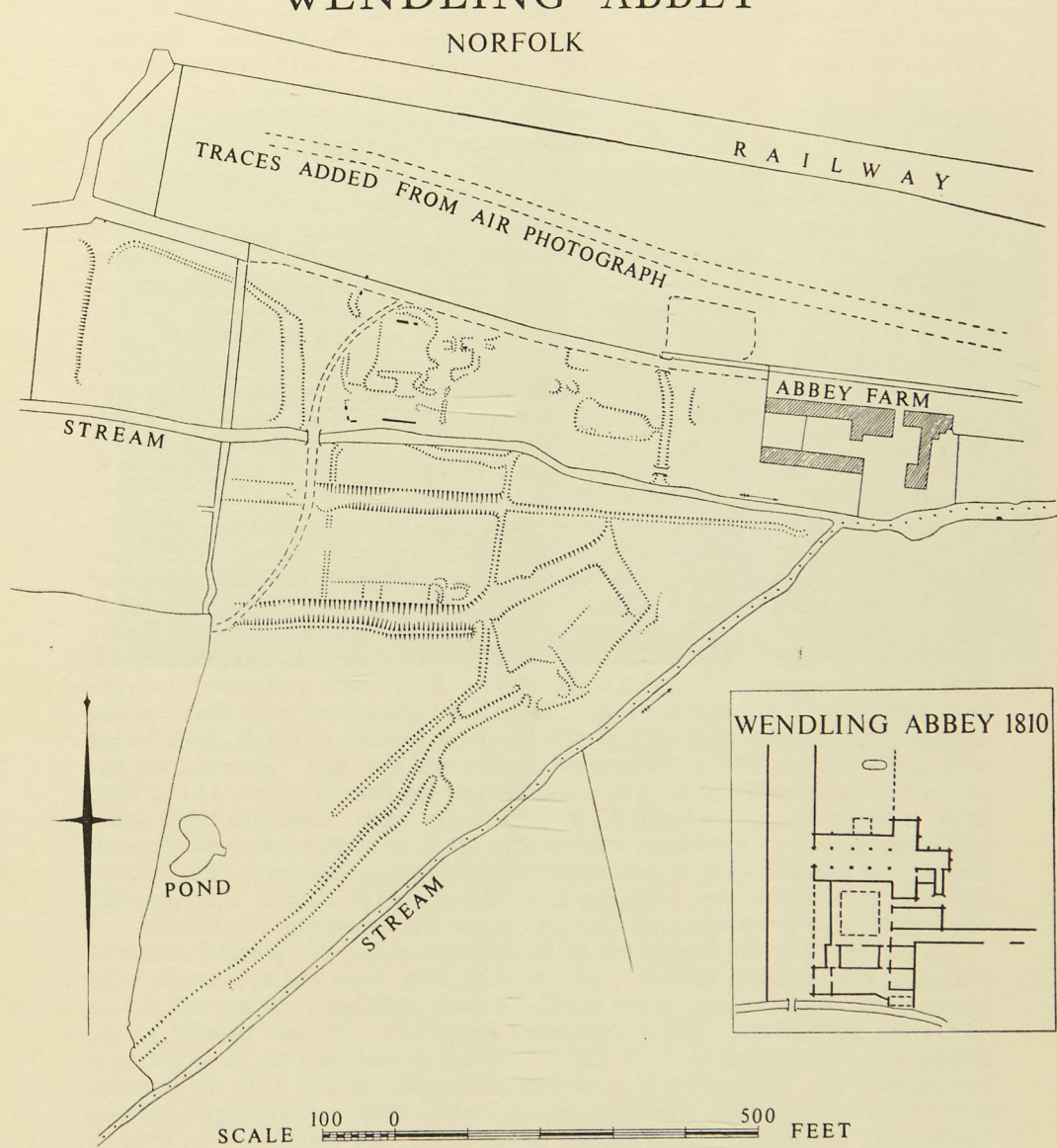
This small house of Premonstratensian Canons was founded in about 1267 as a daughter house of Langley, 8 miles east of Norwich, and suppressed in 1536-37, and its possessions were granted to Dean and Chapter of Christ Church College, Oxford.² The buildings stood on low-lying, rather marshy ground to the north of a small stream which joins the River Wensum near North Elmham. The site has been used as pasture since the dissolution and now forms part of Abbey Farm. In the eighteenth century enough remained for the parts of the monastery to be distinguished, but in 1810 most of the walling that was still standing was demolished for use in road-repairing. Since then only confused mounds with a few fragments of masonry have marked the site. Fortunately during the course of the demolition work the Rev. W. T. Spurdens visited the village and made the only known plan of the abbey.³

The monastery buildings were apparently very similar in size and plan to those at the mother house of Langley. The cruciform church, 184 ft. long internally, with an aisled nave, stood to the north of a cloister 85 ft. square. The refectory and kitchen lay beside the stream to the south of the cloister and the chapter-house and dormitory to the east. The site of the church is now crossed by the road to Abbey Farm and by another cart track. A low mound 35 ft. long and 10 ft. wide, projecting southwards from the farm road and with a mass of masonry 3 ft. high protruding from it, together with another fragment of flint rubble in the hedge on the north side of the road seem to mark the line of the west wall. Otherwise the only remains attributable to the church are another low bank 60 ft. long and 10 ft. wide running eastwards on the south side of the road with a faced wall 25 ft. long 12 ft. south of it. These may mark the lines either of the south arcade and south aisle wall or of the south aisle wall and the wall of the north cloister walk. Further slight mounds to the east cover fragments of masonry and are presumably traces of the eastern arm of the church.

The chapter-house, shown on the 1810 plan as a rectangular room 70 ft. by 30 ft., was probably divided into aisles by two rows of columns like that at Langley. A depression 70 ft. long and 35 ft. wide within a low bank projects eastwards from the earthworks and no doubt marks its position. A level raised platform 70 ft. square certainly indicates the site of the cloister garth while narrow banks visible to the east of it probably cover the east wall and

WENDLING ABBEY

NORFOLK

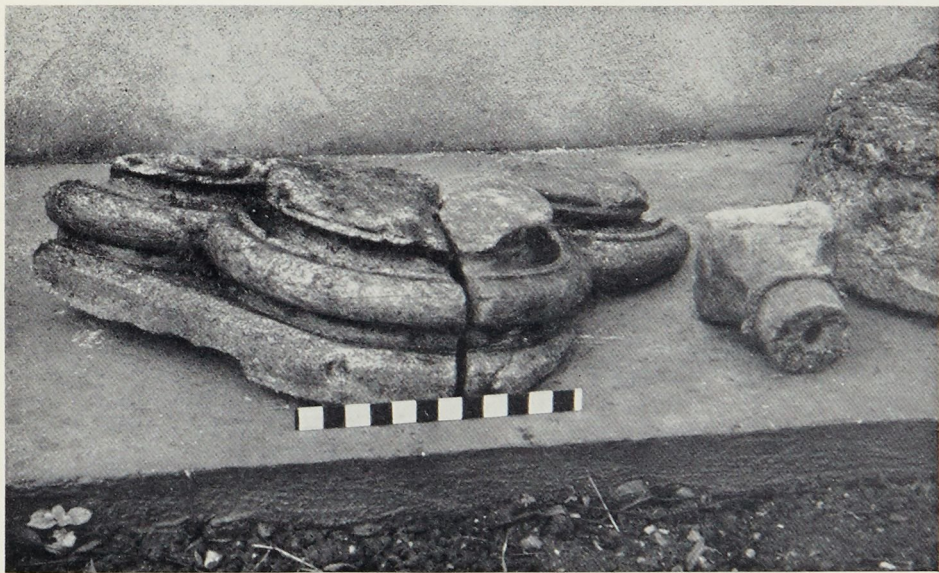


central cross-wall of the south-east range. On the site of the eastern half of the refectory there is now a depression 2 ft. deep and 25 ft. wide, apparently indicating that the floor has been dug up. Another level area 20 ft. wide and 45 ft. long, visible in the correct position, covers the remains of the kitchen. The most prominent pieces of masonry on the site indicate the south-west angle of a buttressed room which projected southwards from the kitchen, and a line of flint-faced wall 50 ft. long and 3 ft. 6 in. high apparently corresponds to the south wall of the yard between the refectory and the stream.

Two of the pieces of dressed stonework lying in the garden to the east of Abbey Farm must have come from the church. These are two identical bases 2 ft. 10 in. in diameter and 7 in. high belonging to clustered columns of Early English type. The mouldings of these "water-holding" bases resemble those at the mother house of Langley, and the columns must have been like those in the nave at East Dereham. One of the bases bears two masons marks—a cross within a triangle. Two voussoirs from a small arch, and a battered one 1 ft. 6 in. long and 1 ft. 1 in. deep belonging to a large arch, may also have come from the church, but a small Early English capital on a shaft 4 in. in diameter may have stood on one of the pillars in the chapter-house or the cloister arcade. Several other blocks, including a window jamb 3 ft. long, are built into the south bank of the stream 100 ft. east of Abbey Farm, and other fragments are said to be preserved at Holly and Mistletoe Farms.

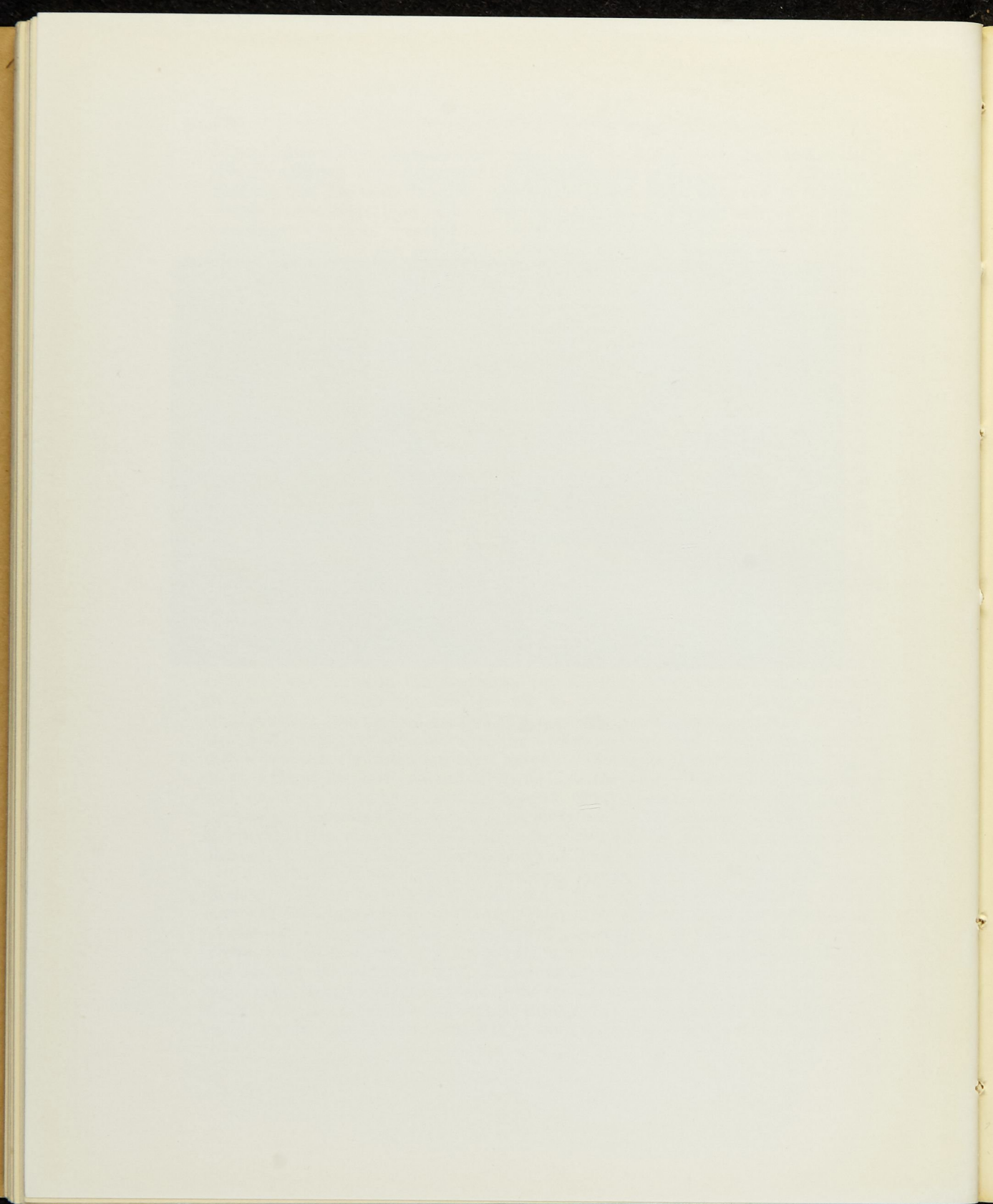
Now that the monastery buildings have been demolished, the earthworks on the south side of the stream are the most prominent feature of the site. There are also slight ditches north of the stream which are probably connected with the abbey. Between the farm road and the railway a ditch 20 to 30 ft. wide can be traced on air photographs for 1,000 ft. running in an east-south-easterly direction.⁴ To the west of the site of the buildings a ditch 30 ft. wide runs at right angles to the stream for 150 ft., then bends north-west, narrows to a width of 12 ft., continues for 250 ft., and disappears just after turning southwards. Twenty feet west of this bend the ground falls 1 ft. 6 in. to the west and a scarp is visible between the stream and the road. Between the site of the monastery and the farm is a roughly rectangular depression 110 ft. long, 35 ft. wide at the east end and 50 ft. wide at the west. This still holds water and would appear to have been a fish pond: 20 ft. from its north western angle are two low mounds 10 ft. across, apparently containing masonry. On the east the pond is connected by a channel 5 ft. wide and 8 ft. long to a north-south ditch 15 ft. wide draining the ditch north of the farm road into the stream.

To the south of the stream the principal features are two parallel east-west ditches. The northern is 30 ft. wide and 1 ft. 6 in. deep and appears to commence at the western hedge of the triangular field, although there are indications on the air photographs that it continued westwards. It runs parallel to the stream and 50 ft. south of it for 380 ft., until it intersects a north-south ditch and narrows to a width of 10 ft., continuing for a further 415 ft. to the junction of the main stream and its southern tributary where bushes and dredged material obscure it. A similar but less regular ditch, 35 ft. wide and 2 ft. 6 in. deep, is visible 130 ft. further south, but 360 ft. from the western hedge it bends north-



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Wendling Abbey. Reassembled pieces of the column base from Abbey Farm.



eastwards, continues for 220 ft., and bends again south-eastwards, narrowing to a width of 30 ft. and terminating at a point 175 ft. south of the stream. At this second angle a channel 8 ft. wide and 15 ft. long connects it with the narrower stretch of the northern ditch. A bank 5 ft. wide runs along the southern lip of this ditch for its first length of 360 ft. while on the northern side is a platform 25 ft. wide, commencing 160 ft. east of the hedge and running 190 ft. eastwards until it terminates in an oval mound 20 ft. across and 4 ft. above the ditch bottom. This platform seems likely to cover the remains of a range of buildings.

Two slight north-south ditches intersect these channels. The western, 160 ft. from the western hedge, is no more than a shallow runnel some 8 ft. wide and is traceable between the stream and the southern ditch. Running at a relatively higher level, it appears to be cut by the northern ditch, and may have served merely for surface drainage. The eastern ditch, wider and deeper, is more clearly integrated with the rest of the ditch system. It connects the north and south ditches and continues southward on the same line for 90 ft., then bends south-westward and terminates abruptly 510 ft. south of the stream. Fifty feet south of the bend a channel 10 ft. wide and 10 ft. long connects it to a slightly sinuous ditch 20 ft. across, which commences at the southern angle of the field 50 ft. west of the tributary stream which is its eastern boundary (and also the parish boundary). This ditch terminates to the north in a disturbed depression measuring 50 ft. (north-south) by 80 ft. (east-west) bounding the southern side of the platform enclosed on the north by the angle of the southern east-west ditch.

Little can be said of the interpretation of these earthworks. Perhaps the south-west ditch and the depression at its northern end are traces of the monastery water-mill. The narrower, somewhat straighter ditches may well be of different age from the broader and less regular members, and their sharpness as seen on the ground and in the air photographs might be held to suggest a comparatively recent origin. The buildings that one assumes stood on the platform on the edge of the southern east-west ditch need not necessarily have been of monastic age, and might in fact be more recent farm-buildings.

¹At the request of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, Ministry of Works, and by R. A. H. Farrar and the writer.

²For an account of the abbey's history see V.C.H. *Norfolk* II (1906), 421 ff. and H. M. Colvin, *The White Canons in England* (1951), 191-3.

³J. Bulwer, *Norfolk Archaeology*, V (1863), 38-40. See also F. Elliston Erwood in *Norfolk Archaeology*, XXI (1923), 175-234, esp. 233-4, and in *Journal Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, XXVIII (1922), 49 ff., and A. W. Clapham in *Archæologia*, LXXII (1923), 117-46, esp. 142-4.

⁴The best air photographs covering the site are 106G/UK/1606, 6274-6 of June, 1946.