

# The Witham Valley; A Landscape With Monasteries?

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*The material this article presents derives largely from a paper written for the publication of the proceedings of a conference held in summer 2006 in Lincoln, which reported, to a largely local audience, on the several strands of investigation and recording promoted under the umbrella of the Witham Valley Archaeological Research Committee, in the valley of the river Witham in central Lincolnshire (Rackham and Williams forthcoming). In its present form, however, this paper seeks to deliver a somewhat more general account of our work on the Witham Valley monasteries than that intended for those proceedings. We are taking the opportunity here to inform a wider, specialist audience of Church Archaeology about a lengthy stream of work relating to the valley's medieval monasteries. The intention, though, is not merely to provide a hand-list for what now amounts to a substantial body of archaeological work, including three new site surveys, but also to round up some of the over-arching themes that have emerged, as we have undertaken a variety of studies on these monasteries. More importantly still, we hope to signal a particular approach we have taken to these sites, as one phase in the long-term history of the valley, and thus to explain how we have sought to explore the concept of 'ritual landscapes' through assessment of the monastic sites and, indeed, to explore the idea of landscape itself (Everson and Stocker forthcoming, chapter 1).*

*This article is a review of research in progress, then, and a signpost to a network of interlinked work, published or in preparation. Even where it uses previously unpublished field surveys, that is by way of example and illustration rather than as a full presentation of results.*

The remains of the dozen or so monastic sites that line the middle reaches of the Witham Valley (Fig 1) were amongst the earliest of Lincolnshire remains to be studied as a group (eg Oliver 1846), and they have attracted archaeological attention almost continuously ever since. One of this paper's authors first considered them within the 'Survey of Lincolnshire' project sponsored by the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in the 1970s, when they were all reviewed at a superficial level, and more

detailed field surveys were undertaken and published for Barlings and Stainfield (Everson *et al* 1991, 66-9, 175-7). That project – in not focusing exclusively on monastic remains – also recorded information for a wide range of pre-existing, contemporary and successor sites which shared the local landscape with the monasteries. Contemporary academic discussion of rural monasteries began to identify some of the insights available from this body of information (Everson 1989), and such a broadly informed approach has

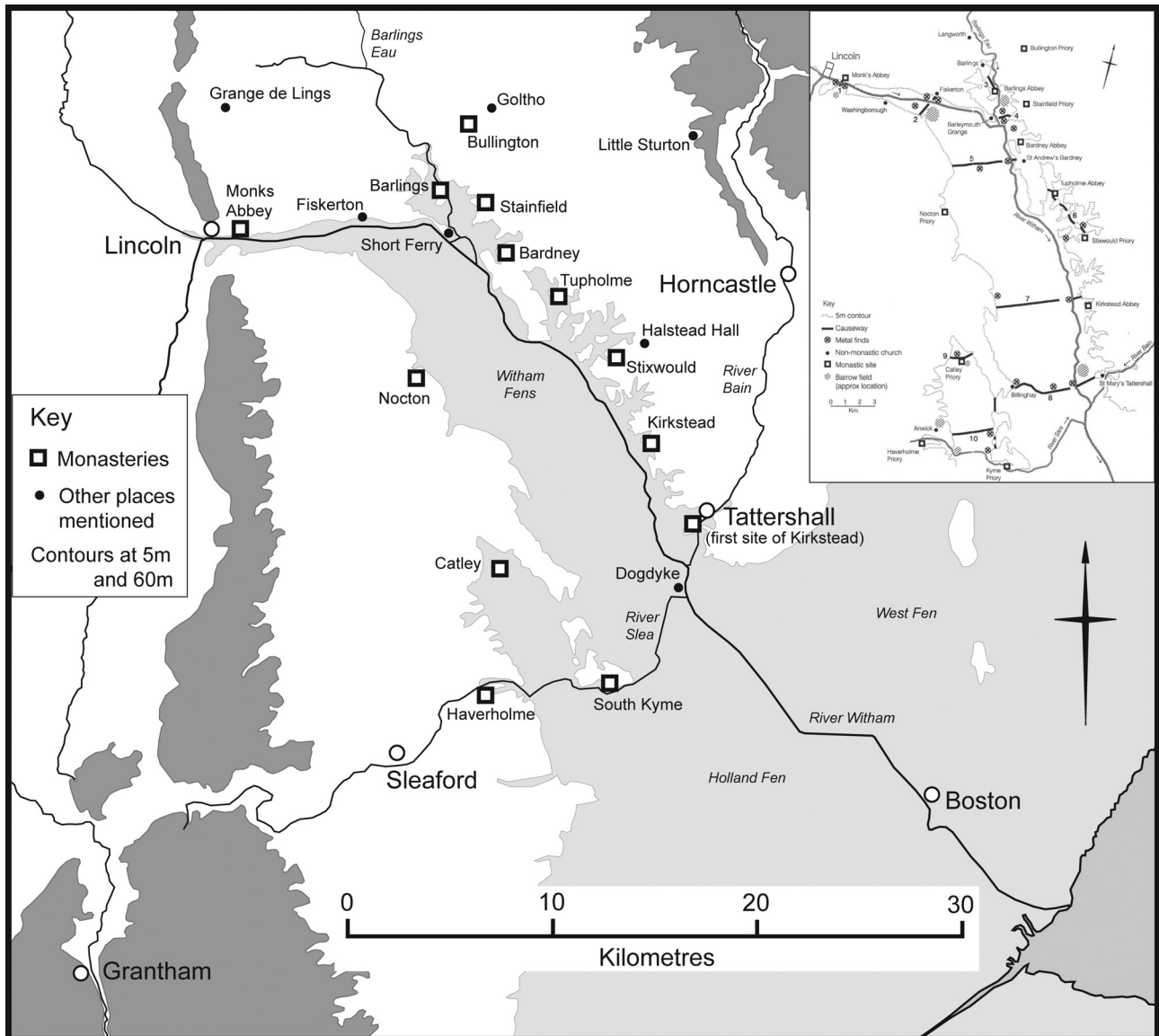


Fig 1  
 Monasteries of the Witham Valley, with other places and features mentioned in the text. Inset: map of the causeways of the central Witham valley, with metalwork finds and early monuments indicating that these are ancient places of ritual, and their Christian 'guardians' – see Stocker and Everson 2003, Figure 17.1

proved increasingly important for the way our understanding of monastic landscapes has developed. Settlement remains like those at Apley or Newball or Osgodby (Everson *et al* 1991, 62-3, 64-5, 131-3) have come to be understood not – simplistically – as small deserted settlements but as settlement types characteristic of the Lincolnshire limewoods, and the resource zone around Bardney that those woodlands represent. This approach informed, for example, a revised interpretation of the important excavations at 'Goltho' – *recte* Bullington – on the northern fringe of that zone, and allowed the location and patronage of Bullington Priory to be more sensibly appreciated

(Everson 1988). A further strand of thinking that emerged from work on monasteries within that RCHME project concerned the ubiquitous impact of post-Dissolution conversions to secular country residences with elaborate contemporary gardens (Everson *et al* 1991, 46-7; Everson 1996; and see Wilson 1991, 24-7).

Further detailed survey was completed by RCHME staff at Tupholme Abbey in 1988 (Cocroft *et al* 1989; Fig 2). This was undertaken to support the important conservation programme initiated by the Heritage Trust for Lincolnshire in acquiring the site, and in 2008 it has informed on-site interpretation of the post-

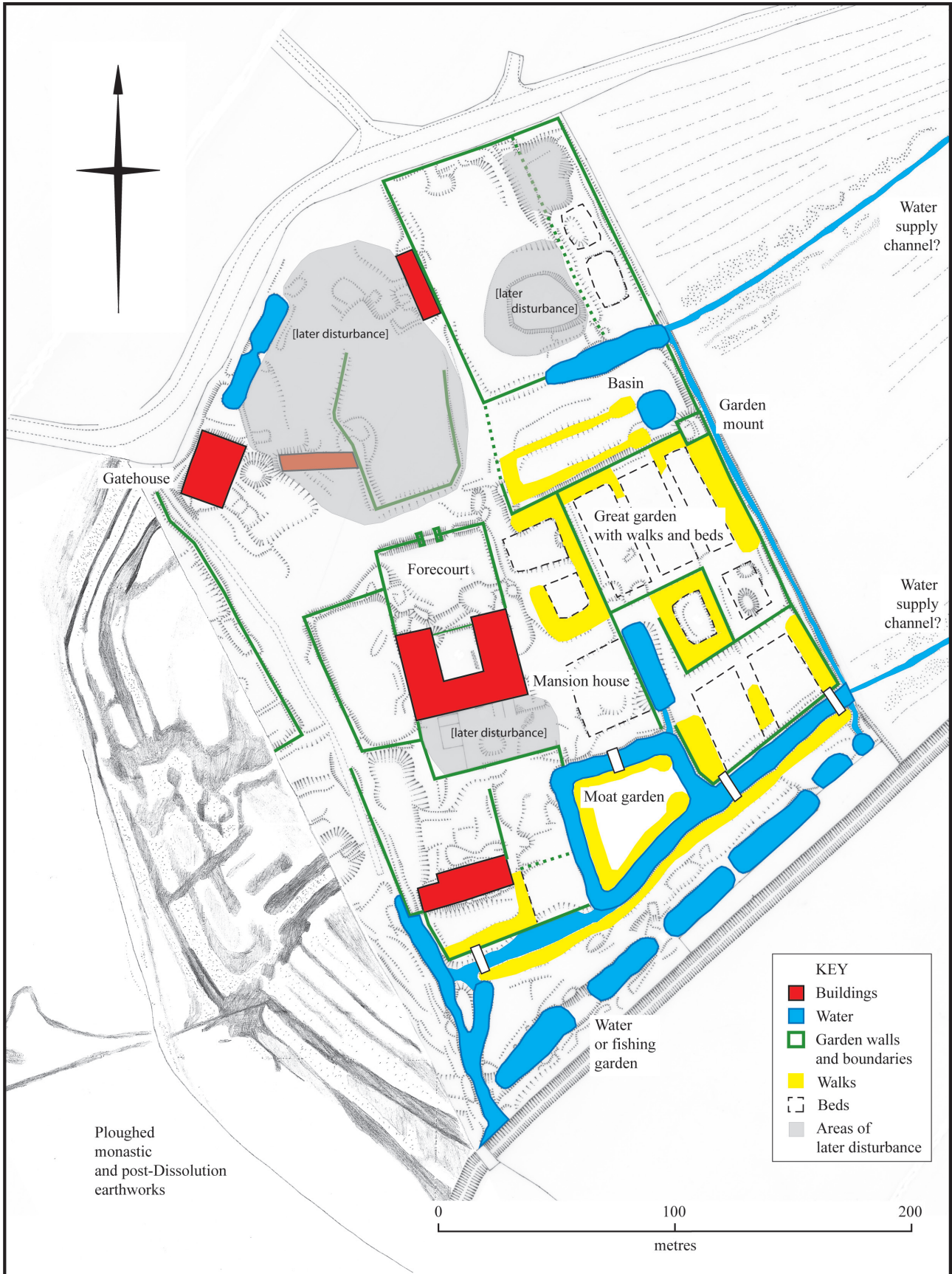


Fig 2  
 Tupholme Abbey, Lincolnshire; interpretative diagram of RCHME's 1988 earthwork survey, revealing the layout of the post-Dissolution house and formal gardens

Dissolution phase as a country house and gardens, which the earthworks represent. In 1993, in preparation for what was intended to become a similar conservation project, an earthwork survey of the precinct remains of Kirkstead was carried out and reported on by Marcus Jecock and Cathy Tuck (Jecock *et al* 1994). More recently, comparable, high-quality earthwork surveys have been undertaken at the sites of Catley Abbey, Stixwold Priory and Bardney Abbey by English Heritage teams under the guidance of Paul Pattison, as noted below.

This paper's second author had meanwhile also become particularly interested in the pre-Viking monastic topography of the valley. Building on work done by the Trust for Lincolnshire Archaeology at Crowland and Bardney in the 1980s, in 1993 an interim publication on the topography of the pre-conquest monastery at Bardney was presented (Stocker 1993), attempting to compare it with contemporary sites locally. In particular, this paper made the point that the post-Conquest abbey sites give a misleading impression of the extent of the early monastic territories at these locations and proposed that their 'monastic landscapes' were of very much greater extent. It became clear that, in order to study the early monasteries effectively, it was vital to set them within the context of the landscape resources upon which they relied. At least for the period prior to the Norman Conquest, it was argued, the study of any physical remains would be incomprehensible without an understanding of the way in which the monasteries interacted with their surrounding resources.

The authors worked together on the distribution of pre-Conquest and early Norman sculpture from monastic and other church sites in Lincolnshire (Everson and Stocker 1999; Stocker and Everson 2006) and this work informed a subsequent consideration of the development of the early church in the county (Stocker 2000; Stocker and Everson 2001). Another outcome of this broader consideration of the landscape setting of the early Lincolnshire monasteries, and of their successors, was a study of what are now a well-known group of causeways within the valley, but which were then – in the 1990s – less clearly perceived (Stocker and Everson 2003). This theme, along with Mike Parker Pearson's interest in and promotion of post-excavation work on the important causeway site excavated by Naomi Field at Fiskerton (Field and

Parker Pearson 2003), was one of the stimuli for the foundation of the WVARC (the Witham Valley Archaeological Research Committee) in 2001 (Catney and Start 2003).

The causeways paper was rooted in a single research question. Is the central reach of the Witham Valley helpfully described as a 'ritual landscape', and if it is, what meanings does that term convey? This is the question that has dominated much of the authors' work on both early monasticism and on the later history of the monastic sites ever since. In particular, we have been keen to explore, both through the Barlings Project (see below) and through the various detailed studies of other monastic landscapes, the manner in which the religious use of the landscape included secular uses, or, alternatively, the extent to which the landscape surrounding these monasteries were perceived as a 'special' or 'reserved' landscape, distinct from the surrounding country. This is the main question that drives the continuing work at Barlings and at other sites. It is a question to which archaeological data and understanding are uniquely relevant. We are approaching it through careful and thorough elucidation of the archaeological evidence of individual sites, of their interrelationships with other pre-existing and contemporary sites, and of the landscape and land-uses within which they operate.

As this work on the broader landscape context of these sites has developed, it has become clear that it is not only the exploitation of the landscape resource in pre-Christian eras that is important to our understanding of the Witham Valley monasteries. The equivalent exploitation of the landscape in the 16th and 17th centuries following the Dissolution has proved equally informative. This rich strand of work has developed rapidly since the initial statements noted above and has been the subject of recent studies at Barlings, Tattershall and Kirkstead (Everson and Stocker 2003b; 2007; 2008).

However, this paper is not intended to explore these themes further, but briefly to record the progress made towards answering the larger question in a handful of studies we have taken forward since the establishment of the WVARC in 2001, and to indicate how they form building blocks in the enquiry.



## *Barlings Abbey in its landscape*

In 1988, the authors began a study with Hugh Richmond to take up the earlier field-survey of Barlings Abbey (Everson *et al* 1991, 66-9) and to attempt the more questioning and cross-disciplinary work that it had indicated might be possible. The initiative was initially quite narrowly directed towards the methodological development of electronic fabric recording techniques, using both the standing monastic ruin at Barlings and the still-occupied buildings of Grange de Lings (one of the abbey's principal granges, located north of Lincoln) as a test-bed. The experimental recording work at both buildings, and the reconstructions based upon it, were completed by the mid 1990s; but the academic results of the various types of survey proved so interesting that RCHME decided to expand the project to produce a study not just of two of the abbey's buildings, linked by their 14th-century building campaigns, but one which also included the entire landscape and looked at the monastery's exploitation of its resources.

Thus, in its final form, the project included studies, using many different archaeological techniques, of the abbey's entire, interconnected, 'home' estate. This exploited the different landscape resources from the Witham Fens, the drier valley floor of the Barlings Eau, the Jurassic dip slope to the west and the high heathland north of Lincoln. The project archive now contains detailed surveys and reconstructions, not just of the abbey itself, but of the abbey's granges at Barlings itself, at Riseholme, Sheephouse, Holme, at Reasby and at Grange de Lings, the planned town of Langworth, and the abbey's important holdings in the villages of Scothern, Sudbrooke, Reepham, Stainton by Langworth, Snelland, Newball, the Carltons and Caenby. The purpose of this was to define and understand the 'landscape resource block' upon which the abbey relied.

In the last five years, and with the focus turning to delivery of this work in hand and looking towards a next stage of study, the project on Barlings Abbey and its landscape was formally divided into three parts.

The initial focus has been the discrete project aimed at publication of the various individual recording projects undertaken on the abbey itself and its manors and granges over the past 15 years (Everson and Stocker forthcoming). Much of this work is

unglamorous and desk- and library-based and has included the production of a large number of reconstruction studies, which in themselves contribute impressively to the traditional preoccupations of monastic studies (Everson and Stocker 2003a, fig 2; Fig 3). But this is balanced by an exploration of how the canons of Barlings Abbey were active and perceived in their home landscape; both economically, and as providers of ecclesiastical facilities through their appropriated churches and grange chapels, and as recipients of secular patronage. In this, we have revealed the ritual aspects of economic landscapes, the economic aspects of ritual landscapes and the political aspects of both, and would wish to emphasise their complete interdependence. The volume has been completed and delivered to English Heritage.

The major divisions in its contents reflect its balance of report and synthesis: Part 1 is an 'Introduction', Part 2 'Components of the landscape', Part 3 'Canons in the landscape', Part 4 'Taking the longer view'. An exciting aspect of the latter part of this study has been the identification of a large country estate of the middle Saxon period, apparently attached to a rural enclosure belonging to an official – the reeve – of Lincoln. The same estate was later associated with

*Fig 3*  
Reconstructed view of the lost monastic church of Barlings Abbey, Lincolnshire, from the north-west, showing parochial aisle. Drawn by Tony Berry.  
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the Constable of Lincoln Castle and the earl, and came to form the core of Barlings Abbey's possessions (Everson and Stocker forthcoming, chapter 12). The manner in which the abbey thereby succeeded to a custodial role in respect of an ancient territory with specific significance for Lincoln emerges as the theme that binds together the various threads of the study, and gives it its title: *Custodians of Continuity*? It is planned that publication will be in 2011.

A second intended objective of the research agenda set out by WVARC in 2001 was to exploit the potential for collaborative working both with members of the interested public and with external scholars and academic bodies. The most systematic and purposeful opportunities for this lie in fieldwork of various types that can be proposed in and around the embayment, or extensive peat-filled basin, within which Barlings Abbey sits on the island of Oxney (Everson and Stocker 2003a, fig 6). These might contribute greatly to the larger project described in the next paragraph. We have continued in discussion with the University of Sheffield about this; but, unfortunately, various factors have delayed this aspect of the project, and it remains as yet unfulfilled. Completion of the phase 1 book, however, has also defined a large number of pieces of work which might readily be undertaken on a local basis. Some of these are quite specific or parochial; but fieldwork to investigate such apparently undistinguished settlements as Stainton by Langworth or Snelland, for example, can contribute to an understanding of the distinctive pattern and economy in the woodland zone and thereby to the larger, multi-disciplinary understanding and management of the Lincolnshire limewoods area. In this wide range of ways, our work can be used to engage local communities and a wider public; the Heritage Trust for Lincolnshire has played the lead role so far in promoting this and will certainly continue to act as the co-ordinating body.

A third strand of activity was originally envisaged as project work aimed at extending our knowledge of the landscape of the Bardney/Barlings embayment, with Oxney island on which Barlings Abbey stood as its central and focal point, during the pre-Viking period and at extending that understanding back as far into pre-history as possible, and certainly at least into the Bronze Age. This agenda is now put on a much firmer footing by the concluding chapter of *Custodians*

*of Continuity*. It will include realising the potential of excellent environmental deposits within the embayment, which are both well preserved and related to a rich array of early field monuments. Here we can hope to grapple with the fundamental questions raised in *Custodians* of the supposed 'ritual landscape' and to ask whether it was indeed a reserved area, or whether, rather, it was simply an area containing rare landscape resources, which were used by the entire community, but whose use required supra-human supervision.

To carry this project forward requires precisely the combination of collaborative working – both with members of the interested public and with external scholars and academic bodies – which WVARC has made a priority. But also, it is an undertaking that would be greatly enhanced through structured collaboration with a parallel project elsewhere in Britain, to afford a greater diversity of approach and comparison of results. Therefore, during the past several years close contacts have been developed with the Landscape Research Centre and the University of Leeds, which have worked towards incorporating the project on the Bardney/Barlings embayment (and indeed the central reaches of the Witham valley in general), as a parallel study, within the long-running Vale of Pickering landscape project in North Yorkshire, which is also focused on the concept of 'ritual landscape' and on elucidating its validity (Morris 2005; Powlesland 2003; <http://www.landscaperesearchcentre.org/>). In 2005 it was suggested that there might be mutual and academic benefits in the Barlings work becoming a collaborative project to the Yorkshire study, acting as a comparandum to the Vale of Pickering. In spring 2007, the collaboration presented its objectives and achievements as a full session of six papers – two of them about the Witham – under the title of 'Ritual Landscape or Rituallity in the Landscape' at the 42nd annual international congress on medieval studies at Kalamazoo (<http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/congress/archive/sessionarchive.html>). The benefits of such a joint project remain clear, and it is hoped that publication of the Barlings book will lead to detailed proposals being put forward for funding by grant-giving bodies.

The main publication from the Barlings project since 2001, however, has been the study of the post-Dissolution landscape of the monastery (Everson and

Stocker 2003b; and see Everson and Stocker 2008). This explored the distinctive circumstances surrounding the ‘early’ dissolution of the monastery as a result of the Lincolnshire Rising of 1536 and its interest as an example of the archaeological imprint of the Reformation. It concentrated on explicating the earthwork remains of the palace-and-garden complex on the abbey site itself, which is known to have been constructed by Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk immediately following the Rising in 1536, when he was acting as the King’s Lieutenant in Lincolnshire. We suggest that, in this vice-regal role, Brandon was keen to create a dramatic new building on the site of the medieval abbot’s house to make the point that, through him, the King was now lord of the Barlings landscape. Brandon furthermore contrived to display the abbey’s church and cloisters, in ruins, within a garden setting (Fig 4) in order to underline the finality of the religious change the King had put in place.

A more cursory treatment was given to a second Witham Valley monastery condemned as traitorous as a result of the Lincolnshire Rising, namely Kirkstead Abbey. A fuller understanding of this site has now emerged (Fig 5), but only through subsequent, more ambitious consideration of Kirkstead and Tattershall and their distinctive landscape context between the Rivers Witham and Bain.

### *Kirkstead Abbey and its landscape*

During the 1990s there were hopes that the monastic precinct at Kirkstead Abbey – well known from the frequent publication of excellent air photographs of it – would become the subject of a programme of conservation and display. In support of this possibility, RCHME undertook a site survey and air-photographic transcription, with the aim of elucidating not just the earthworks, but also the larger, plough-levelled site of the monastery (Jecock *et al* 1994). Over the past five years we have taken up the excellent groundwork laid by that study in several publications (Everson and Stocker 2005; 2007; 2008), all of which look at the setting of the later medieval monastery in its broader landscape and aim to address questions about the rituality of landscape.

Like all the other Witham monasteries, Kirkstead is related to cross-valley causeways. Already in that

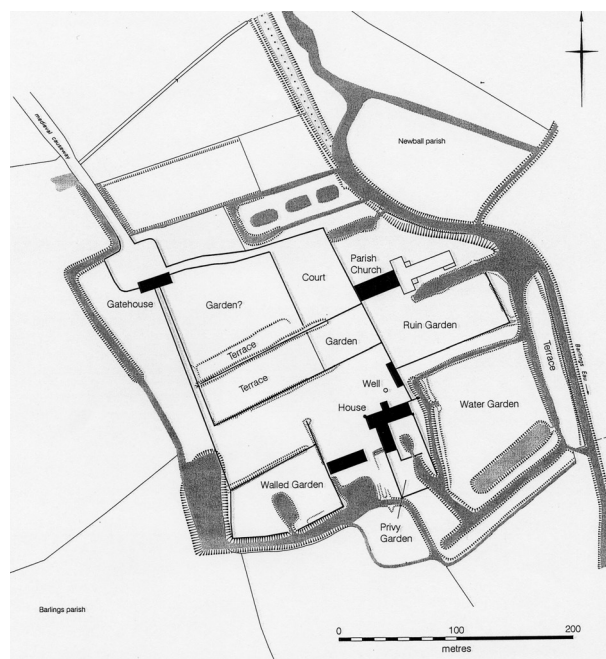


Fig 4  
*Barlings Abbey, Lincolnshire: interpreted post-Dissolution layout based on RCHME survey plan – see Everson and Stocker 2003b, Figure 5*



Fig 5  
*Kirkstead Abbey, Lincolnshire: interpreted post-Dissolution layout as Charles Brandon’s stables and stud, (a) stable courts (b) kennels (c) mews or lodge (d) north gate and exercise yard (e) south entrance – see Everson and Stocker 2008. Based on RCHME survey plan (Jecock *et al* 1994)*

context, we questioned the widely-held myth – perpetuated by the monks themselves – that Cistercian houses were established in places that had previously been unoccupied, and concluded that the Cistercians of Kirkstead had actually been moving into a rich landscape where rare resources were already carefully exploited, and had long been so (Stocker and Everson 2003). Furthermore, and as at Barlings, we have now shown that the process of exploitation was already supervised before the 12th century by resident ecclesiastical institutions and continued to be exploited by secular lords after the Dissolution (Everson and Stocker 2008).

These recent studies combine to address a series of questions about the landscape setting of this great monastic house. Why did the Cistercians come to this part of the valley? What was the character of the land before they arrived and what investment did the church already hold here? What then happened to that distinctive landscape, both under monastic occupation and under the re-occupation of the monastery's site by Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk after the Dissolution? These landscape studies (Everson and Stocker 2007; 2008) have necessarily involved a detailed consideration of the whole spit of land between the Rivers Witham and Bain, as far north as Stixwold and Horsington, not just of the monastic site of Kirkstead itself. They have also caused us, particularly, to advance the study of the site of Tattershall castle in a more detailed way, since it is there (we have long maintained) that the Cistercian community first established itself (Stocker and Everson 2003, 276-9). Our conviction was developed within a detailed study of the lost township of Little Sturton near Horncastle, which was where Sir Frank Stenton conjectured that the monks might have established their original monastery (Everson and Stocker 2005).

The conclusions of this work at Kirkstead have been strikingly similar to that at Barlings. As at Barlings, we can argue that Kirkstead Abbey represented merely the latest ecclesiastical investment in an area of landscape containing rare resources: in this case not just fishing and fowling, but more specifically managed woodland. We have shown that these landscape resources continued to be the basis for the distinctive settlement and landscape management patterns of the area after the disappearance of the monasteries. This work also shows that, before the

major investment in the area by the great monastic houses in the 12th century, the church was already an important partner in the exploitation of these resources. There are hints that these resources were present at earlier dates, extending back into prehistory, and there is a need, through fieldwork, to elucidate the period when prehistoric exploitation of these resources was also accompanied by extensive ritual demonstrations, such as the deposition of metalwork in the river.

### *Catley, Stixwold and Bardney surveys*

As a direct result of the agenda set out by WVARC in 2001, English Heritage (EH) archaeological survey teams were active during the following five years at several other Witham Valley monastic sites, laying the groundwork for further study through a series of high-quality and finely observed site surveys analogous to those at Barlings, Tupholme and Kirkstead which have provided crucial stimulation to the insights reported above. The plans resulting from this fieldwork by Paul Pattison and his colleagues are illustrated in Figures 6, 7, 8.

At Catley Priory, EH's earthwork survey contributed to the public conservation and display project led by Lincolnshire County Council as owners of the site, and brought together in its report the results of both aerial photographic transcription and fieldwalking surveys of the wider site (Hunt and Brown 2005). There is some room for debate, however, about the initial interpretations of the field survey results offered by the report. Interpreting the well-preserved earthworks directly in terms of monastic features – including a church and double cloister, main drain, conduit house etcetera, within an 'inner precinct boundary' – is essentially unconvincing in respect of the recorded details. It also pays insufficient regard to field archaeologists' common experience of the earthworks of former monastic sites over the last generation, which has demonstrated on sites in all parts of the country – and not least in Lincolnshire (Everson *et al* 1991, 46-7; Everson 1996) – that it is the norm for the evidence of post-Dissolution activity to re-model and mask the monastic layout. At Catley, an angular geometrical layout of ponds and water



*Fig 6*

*English Heritage plan of the remains of Catley Priory, Lincolnshire; surveyed in March 2004 by Abby Hunt and Moraig Brown. Post-Dissolution features: (a) water garden; (b) site of post-Dissolution house converted from monastic cloister; (c) later barn and farmyard complex. Redrawn for publication by Deborah Cunliffe. © English Heritage*

Fig 7  
*English Heritage plan of the remains of Stixwold Priory, Lincolnshire; surveyed in December 2003-January 2004 by Louise Barker and Nathalie Barrett. Post-Dissolution features: (a-b) routeway from gatehouse; (c) court or stable yard; (d) formal garden compartment. Redrawn for publication by Deborah Cunliffe. © English Heritage*

*Fig 8  
English Heritage plan of the remains of Bardney Abbey,  
Lincolnshire; surveyed in December 2003-January 2004  
by Moraig Brown and Paul Pattison. (a) post-Dissolution  
stabling and services. Redrawn for publication by  
Deborah Cunliffe. © English Heritage*

channels filling the south-west quadrant of the earthworks (Fig 6) looks like nothing so much as a formal, post-Dissolution water garden, for which the remains in a similar location at Tupholme bear comparison (Fig 2). As at Tupholme, also, the presumed church and cloisters have the appearance of a house ranged around three or four sides of a court, probably indeed retaining the footprint and perhaps some of the fabric of the monastic arrangement, but a post-Dissolution layout as recorded. A series of generally rectangular closes or garden compartments lies in conformity with this core. Building foundations to the west of the core are plausibly interpreted as a farmyard complex, including a large barn with big opposed entrances, which are additions when in the 17th and 18th centuries the house became a tenanted farm, as documentary evidence records. Such a sequence of declining status and reduced scale of post-Dissolution use is also typical. The owner of Catley in the wake of the Dissolution was Robert Carr of Sleaford; and even in the absence of direct documentation of his residence there, the field evidence suggests that – like so many ambitious ‘rising’ gentry of the era, and having certainly pieced together considerable landholdings on the heath and fen edge east of Sleaford (Hodgett 1975, 7, 32, 57-8) – he created a country residence on the monastic site to complement his Sleaford base. The fieldwalking and aerial evidence rather suggests that, as at Kirkstead and probably Tupholme and Stainfield, this post-Dissolution phase occupied only part of the medieval precinct and gives a false impression of the monastic extent and its bounds (Hunt and Brown 2005, fig 3).

The site and archaeological remains of Stixwoud Priory (Fig 7) are probably the least known of all the Witham monasteries, which makes the new plan (and a linked assessment of Abbey Farm (Monkton 2004)) an especially valuable piece of work. But here too, if one attempts to read the remains directly in monastic terms, it quickly becomes a matter of forced interpretations and special pleading, including perhaps an appeal to the (dubious) possibility that the irregular layout arises because this was a nunnery. In practice, among the most distinctive features of the site are

(1) an east-west routeway through the complex, leading from the site of the monastic gatehouse (which survived in use until the mid 19th century),

(2) on the north side of this way and just inside that entrance a well-defined yard or court with a long range of buildings (perhaps stabling?) along its southern edge,

(3) towards the west side of the complex a quite square configuration of earthworks with water features on three sides and a prominent mound occupying the north half of its interior; the whole thing looking ornamental and perhaps part of a formal garden.

Each of these, at the least, looks post-monastic, though a coherent explication of the earthworks requires more work. The priory’s dissolution was complex and, exceptionally, involved a refoundation as a nunnery under royal protection. The reasons that lay behind this development must be significant and may relate to the wider pattern of monasteries along the Witham, since a first refoundation involved Benedictines displaced from Stainfield. At all events, a clearer understanding of Stixwoud evidently requires attention to a wider local landscape, as we have found so effective elsewhere. That should include the village of Stixwoud and especially Halstead Hall, which is said to have become the principal post-Dissolution secular residence thereabouts, reusing monastic fabric in its construction. The Dighton family of Sturton Old Hall may have been key players in this process: some recycled monastic *spolia*, perhaps from Stixwoud, was certainly redeployed in their new mid or late 16th-century mansion at Little Sturton near Horncastle (Everson *et al* 2008, 13-23).

At Bardney (Fig 8) we have the clearest combination of archaeological and documentary evidence for the thoroughgoing reuse of the monastic site for a post-Dissolution house and its garden setting, in the hands (as was nearby Stainfield (Everson *et al* 1991, 175-7; Lott 2008, Figs 8 and 9)) of a branch of the Tyrwhitt family. Despite the frequent use of aerial images of Bardney to illustrate a monastic layout, we know that that clarity results wholly from the excavations of the early 20th century and their hasty and spare backfilling, leaving the pattern of monastic church and cloister clearly legible as it would not have been before excavations took place. The contrast with earthworks outside the limited area of clearance is sharp. The peripheral earthworks define a network of



generally rectangular garden compartments, some containing ponds or defined by raised walks or other details, but with the whole layout conforming to the orientation of the house which occupied at least the west cloistral range. The very well-defined long building range to the north-west, with an entrance through it to a court beyond, again looks like contemporary stabling and services. Whether the precinct we see now is also defined, in whole or part, by the post-Dissolution use of the site – as we have found sometimes elsewhere – is something evidently not hitherto considered or tested archaeologically.

## *Conclusion*

On its establishment in 2001, WVARC's first task was to develop a Research Agenda for work in the valley. This document was intended to be a guide to some of the broader academic objectives pointed out to us by the impressive group of international scholars who had attended the 2001 Lincoln conference. The Research Agenda (see Start in Rackham and Williams forthcoming) identified several strands of enquiry that should be pursued in subsequent project work in the valley; and, by way of conclusion, we might compare progress in the various projects with which we have been engaged with the guidance it offered us.

Most notably, in studying the Witham monasteries we have responded to the recommendations within the Research Agenda proposing that future projects explore the relationships between ritual uses of the landscape and functional uses. Attention has been directed particularly at the question of whether at various periods the ritualistic uses of the valley have been separated from the functional exploitation of the same resources, or whether, alternatively, the day-to-day exploitation of the landscape resources available here was accompanied by equivalent ritualised activities. This is the fundamental question that has informed most of the recent work on the valley's monasteries described above.

### *1) Ritualistic uses of the Witham landscape*

In the past five years we have done little work explicitly on the river itself as the 'guardian of

memory', as recommended in the Research Agenda. Nevertheless, as all of the monastic sites are closely related both to the open water itself and to its exploitation, it might be said that we have explored the symbolism of the river to some extent. The more detailed work has progressed understanding of the ritualistic uses of causeways 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 (as numbered in Everson and Stocker 2003a, fig 1); although, as yet, no archaeological fieldwork has investigated any of these physical structures. Of these, 3 and 4 are related to the Bardney/Barlings embayment, one of the riverine embayments recommended by the Research Agenda as being of particular interest. The Research Agenda emphasised the role of distinctive land forms as foci of ritual activity. The later medieval Barlings Abbey is on the prominent island of Oxney. We have also argued that the impression of an 'island', or at least a promontory partially surrounded by water, was important in the ecclesiastical exploitation of Bardney, Kirkstead and Tattershall (Stocker 1993; Everson and Stocker 2007; 2008). On a larger scale, the Research Agenda stressed the significance of Lindsey itself as an island, and asked whether the islands within it might be perceived as symbolic microcosms of the whole. To an extent this possibility has proved susceptible to exploration at Barlings, where during the Dissolution period the abbey was clearly seen to 'stand for' Lindsey (Everson and Stocker 2003b).

It has been particularly easy to address questions of ritualistic uses of the landscape by looking at mortuary behaviour at several of these monastic sites. Studies of Barlings, Kirkstead and Tattershall have explored their uses as lordly mausoleums. In particular, identification of the surviving chapel of St Leonard at Kirkstead (Fig 9) as a chantry chapel of the de Tateshale family, lords of Tattershall, and exploration of its setting within the larger monastic landscape, has documented how this distinctive landscape provided an ideal symbolic setting for complex medieval mortuary symbolism (Everson and Stocker 2007; 2008, 92-100). A very similar conclusion has also been reached about the major reconstruction of Barlings Abbey in the 1330s, under the patronage of Alice de Lacy and King Edward III (Everson and Stocker forthcoming, chapters 3 and 11).

Barlings, Tattershall and Kirkstead are all, to varying extents, associated with prehistoric and

Fig 9

*Samuel Buck's engraved view of Kirkstead Abbey, Lincolnshire, with St Leonard's Kirkstead in the background; published 1726*

Roman monuments or groups of monuments; and we have already suggested that there might be close relationships between the monastic mausoleums and the ritualistic uses of the causeways across the Witham and its embayments, represented today, perhaps, only by the deposition of medieval swords in the river. We anticipate that more closely documented relationships between the causeways and the funerals of lords of Lindsey will emerge from work projected as phase 3, especially through comparisons with the more fully explored sites in Ryedale.

Finally, the fact that, at different periods, both the Bardney/Barlings embayment and the Tattershall confluence might have stood at the head of the tidal reach of the Witham remains of great interest. In an exciting passage of archaeology, Mike Parker Pearson showed how important the tide was in the understanding of the Fiskerton causeway (Field and Parker Pearson 2003), but we have as yet only been able to touch on this matter at either of those two other locales. It is one of the issues in which sampling and analysis of well-preserved environmental deposits is critical.

## *2) Functional uses of the valley landscape*

Alongside this investigation of ritualistic uses of the valley, the day-to-day exploitation of the valley landscape's resources by the monastic houses and, to a limited extent, by their predecessors has also been explored. As observed in the Research Agenda, causeways 4 and 8 (both of which have been investigated during the course of our recent work) are in the vicinity of known landing complexes and nodes of trade, at Short Ferry and Dogdyke respectively. Although work has still to be undertaken on the existing collection of material from Short Ferry and will need to form an element of the projected study of the embayment, a start has been made over the relationships between Dogdyke and Tattershall, with the suggestion that modern Tattershall itself owes its origin to an early landing-place (Fig 10; Everson and Stocker 2008, 88-92). We can now ask, therefore, to what extent the causeways are sited for the convenience of travellers or traders wanting to cross the river. Or can they be seen as simply leading to and from recognised landing places? If there is a strong connection between the causeways and long-distance trading routes, what does that tell us about the nature

of ritualistic depositions alongside them? Are the two activities mutually exclusive, or should we be seeing a much closer relationship between trading places and ritual complexes – as is frequently suggested in the early medieval period as well as both earlier and later (for example, Stocker 2006, 209-24)? How do such debates surrounding the relationship of votive deposition to trade relate to the well-established discussions about the circulation of metal in prehistoric societies?

In the cases of both Barlings and Kirkstead it has proved possible to explore in some detail arable, pastoral, arboreal and riverine exploitation of their landscapes in the period between the 8th and the 18th centuries (Everson and Stocker 2008; forthcoming, chapter 9). It seems quite clear from this that causeways themselves played a full part in the exploitation of these landscape resources and that the contemporary ritualistic uses for which there is evidence must have been taking place alongside that exploitation. This is an important straw in the wind, pointing towards the answer to one of our fundamental questions: whether the Witham Valley was a reserved ritual landscape or, rather, a fully

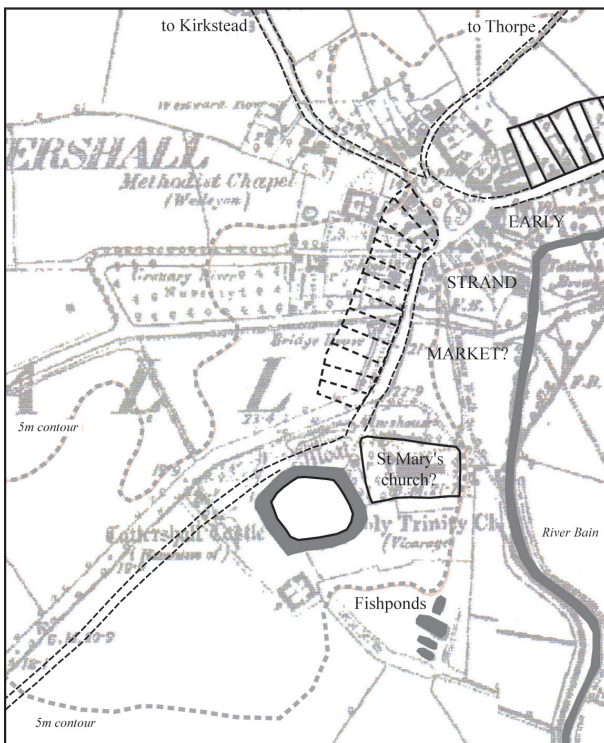


Fig 10  
Tattershall, Lincolnshire: castle, church and market in the time of Robert de Tateshale 3 – see Everson and Stocker 2008

Fig 11

Public participation: drawing loose architectural fragments at Tupholme Abbey, debriefing on first day. Photo courtesy of Simon Erskine Crum and the Friends of Lincolnshire Archaeology

exploited landscape where ritualistic behaviour accompanied the day-to-day exploitation of the rare resources it contained.

### 3) Public engagement

The Research Agenda stressed, quite correctly, that the engagement of the public in the archaeological and landscape heritage of the valley must represent an important priority. An excellent lead has been given on this front by Heritage Lincolnshire (Fig 11), who have undertaken presentation work at the abbeys of Barlings, Bardney and (especially) Tupholme. The major National Trust property at Tattershall remains an obvious potential focus for similar work further south in the valley. Our own contribution in the past five years has been confined to conventional methods such as numerous lectures on various aspects of our work, given both by the authors together and severally and by several of our collaborators, to both specialist and non-specialist audiences alike. Although discussions have been opened both with the Environment Agency team dealing with public access and with the County Council team dealing with the ‘Lincolnshire Limewoods’ project, the potential for conveying the excitement and interest of new insights and evolving research reported here remains to be exploited and remains a future priority.

As noted at the outset, it is not the purpose of this paper to offer conclusions, or to articulate our fuller

understanding of the intimate and rewarding interrelationships of the sacred and the mundane in the study of early landscapes. Still less do we urge that the Witham Valley is exceptional or unique. We have offered several examples and analogies in the past, albeit unsystematically, in pointing to the Thames, Trent and Ouse valleys as well as to the Vale of Pickering for comparison (Stocker and Everson 2003, 284-5; Stocker 2006, 209-11). The relevance is undoubtedly still wider. Where the Witham may be exceptional, perhaps, is in the opportunities it offers for study and in the groundwork that has been laid by those who have worked there in recent years. This paper's issue is rather one of approaches, and of the opportunities we have found they open up. We hope there may be helpful lessons or stimulation in our experience for others interested in monasteries and their landscapes elsewhere.

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