

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 778

Report on an Archaeological Desk Top Assessment
of
The former Coach House, Withburga Lane, East Dereham,
Norfolk

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Local Authority No.076759

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Location: The former Coach House, Withburga Lane, East Dereham, Norfolk (Breckland District)

Grid Ref: TF 9875 1329

Date of work: 4th-10th November 2002

Funding Body: Brown and Co

Summary

The desk top assessment of this development site indicates potential for understanding the origins of East Dereham both as a town and possibly as an early monastic site. The existence of Saint Withburga and her association with East Dereham is obscure, but the importance of this site may equally lie in its potential to provide evidence for the Saxon origins of Dereham as an urban place, aside from the tantalising 'monastic' element. A development site close to the church may throw light on Dereham's beginnings even if direct evidence of early saints may be elusive.

1.0 Introduction

This archaeological desktop assessment was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: ARJH 27.2.02) and a Project Design prepared by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU Ref: 1466).

The work was designed to assist in defining the character and extent of any archaeological remains within the proposed redevelopment area, following the guidelines set out in *Planning and Policy Guidance 16 — Archaeology and Planning* (Department of the Environment 1990). The results will enable decisions to be made by the Local Planning Authority with regard to the treatment of any archaeological remains found.

No fieldwork has been carried out in connection with this study, nor has reference been made to Listed Buildings information or other present planning constraints.

2.0 Geology and Topography

The site lies on a long slope, rising up from the stream situated to the west of the proposed development, with little evident scarping or landscaping. It is on the edge of the valley deposits where the natural subsoil is likely to be Boulder Clay. The site lies at between 48.5m and 50.0m OD.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

Modern East Dereham is now centred around the Market Place which, due to disastrous fires in 1581 and 1679 (when more than 170 people suffered loss of homes and buildings), has an 18th century and later aspect.

The development site lies close to the 12th century parish church of St Nicholas, in Withburga Lane, perhaps the medieval focus for the town when Church Street could have been used as a market area (Fig. 1). It is possible that the present Market Place was laid out after the fire of 1581, but a medieval date for this large open market cannot be discounted. The later medieval guildhall stood further to the south, on Guild Hall Street; it was suppressed in 1548.

It might be noted here that the form of the church (cruciform) and the size of the churchyard (Fig. 2), have suggested an important status for the church in the Late Saxon period (information supplied by T. Pestell). Whether it was ever a Minster church is not known but may be likely. If so, this need not imply high status in the Middle Saxon period but reflect its growing Late Saxon status.

The history of East Dereham manor can be traced back to the 970s at least, when King Edgar and Bishop Ethelwold of Winchester granted the manor of East Dereham to the monastery at Ely (as part of the monastic refoundation programme). The grant was recorded in the *Liber Eliensis*, Ely's own record of its history and possessions, compiled in the 12th century. At Domesday, Ely had the jurisdiction of Mitford Hundred, which was attached to the manor.

In 1109, the control of the manor changed from monastic to episcopal under the jurisdiction of the now Bishop of Ely and came eventually to the Crown in 1558.

A Middle Saxon saint: St Withburga

Medieval tradition locates the 7th century East Anglian royal saint Withburga and her 'nunnery' at East Dereham, although physical evidence is lacking. There are many other problems with the traditional stories and the historical accounts of her career from early sources.

The story of Withburga is included at the end of this report, along with some information on associated matters (Appendix 1). In considering her story and its possible setting, it should be remembered that 'DEORHAM' was thought sufficient in the sources to identify the place of her burial. Whether East or West Dereham was the 'locus' for the saint and whether she existed according to the sources cannot be satisfactorily determined.

4.0 Cartographic Evidence

Map sources are few, but seem to show little real change in this corner of East Dereham since the mid-18th century, some while after the second 'Great Fire' in 1679.

- Map of Dereham Town c.1757

Fig. 3

This map (Boston and Puddy 1952) shows the town from the south in quite detailed elevation. It depicts a long range of buildings (with three stacks and an inn sign) on the east side of the street facing Washbridge Lane. The building was an inn (and thus might have had a cellar), but has been demolished. It may have been similar to Bishop Bonner's Cottage opposite, a building of the early 17th (not 16th) century.

- Enclosure map 1812

Fig. 4

This map shows the site much as it is today, as a long empty plot reaching back to the east.

- Ordnance Survey map of 1928

Fig. 5

This shows minor buildings now standing close but not on the street frontage and what must be the existing brick building to the rear of the plot.

5.0 Archaeological Observations

There have been no formal archaeological excavations within East Dereham and the few recorded finds in the vicinity come from close to the church (see below).

- Site 2883: The Guildhall. Mostly 18th century but with earlier (possibly 16th century) doorways in the brick wall to the north, along the street. Excavation down to 2m for an extension to the east of the building revealed modern deposits. Excavation in the carpark revealed post-medieval walls, probably relatively modern.
- Site 2889: Market Place. Possibly laid out after the fire of 1581?
- Site 2890: St Nicholas' Church. The church dates to the 12th century, with later changes. The 'holy well' at the west end is possibly medieval in origin. Traditionally associated with St Withburga. The present well is a flint-walled 'basin' of probable 18th century date, although parts of the structure may be late medieval. Blomefield (1810, 215) describes the well (see Appendix 1).
- Site 12398: 36 Beccles Gate (north-west of the church). 17th or 18th century building with cellars containing a well and wall niches.
- Site 20551: 50m east of the site: casual find; single medieval pottery sherd.
- Site 21746: Allotments west of church. Casual find of two medieval pottery sherds.
- Site 21970: Tithe barn. To the south-west of the site, where the school now stands, once stood a 'tithe barn', depicted on the 18th century map (Fig. 3).

6.0 The Site Today

The site is at present derelict although recently used as a carpark. It contains a single storey building at the rear (Fig. 5) and concrete surfaces for vehicle access and standing. Part of the plot, not included in the development area, contains an electricity transformer.

It is unlikely that the natural subsoil lies at any great depth below the present surface and will probably follow the present site profile; cellarage at the frontage, where the inn once stood, is possible but not evidenced.

7.0 Conclusions

Norfolk had many small medieval market towns, few of which have seen any archaeological activity. Many of their place names often end in '*ham*', perhaps signifying an estate centre or some other 'central place'. It is possible that many have their roots in the Anglo-Saxon period when large estates and their settlement hierarchy were social features.

The existence of Withburga and her association with either East or West Dereham remains obscure, but the importance of this site may equally lie in the Saxon origins of Dereham as an urban place, aside from the tantalising 'monastic' element. In any case, a site close to a Minster church may throw light on Dereham's early beginnings, although direct evidence of early saints may be elusive.

When the long building depicted on the map of c.1757 was demolished, nothing much appears to have replaced it. There is potential for survival of evidence of pre-conquest activity here, possibly little disturbed since medieval times, with few modern intrusions.

Recommendations for future work based upon this report will be made by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology.

Acknowledgements

The work was undertaken for Brown and Co, to whom we are grateful for commissioning this report. We are grateful to Norfolk Landscape Archaeology for access to the County SMR and advice from Dr A Rogerson on aspects of the town's history. The report was illustrated and produced by Maggie Footitt and edited by Alice Lyons.

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Appendix 1: St Withburga and Dereham

Background

The veneration of holy people, men and women, is a feature of the early church in England, and although the historical records of these people and their lives are usually obscure, we may be right to think that the "invention" of a saint and the creation of "a cult" was often done for secular reasons, often to do with a royal dynasty. The church and the aristocracy in the early period were very close and the royal families provided the higher echelons of the church. In return, the church was able to provide or add some legitimacy to dynastic ambition by recognising some ancestor as a saint, and giving some dynasty an ancestor marked by God as holy. Saints and holy people were thus political creations for contemporary purposes and sometimes sanctity involved the discovery of bodies in an incorrupt state (1 Corinthians XV) and the writing of biographies to enhance the saint's prestige.

The popularity of these early English saints continued after the Conquest, in some places they were revived and made the centre of a new cult equipped with new biographies.

The East Anglian dynasty

The best source for a clear narrative of the early years of the English Church is Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, written in 731. At several places, Bede tells us about the East Anglian king, Anna, who was killed by the pagan Mercian king, Penda, in AD 654. Bede writes about the careers of Anna's daughters, Etheldreda (founded Ely AD 673), Sexburga (founded Sheppey AD 664), Aethelburga (abbess at Brie) and the family members who came after them, Sexburga's two daughters, Eorcengota (a nun at Brie) and Eorminilda (at Sheppey and Ely). Eorminilda's own daughter, Werburga, had been at Sheppey and then Ely, and went to Mercia. In Mercia she founded monasteries at Hanbury and Trentham, where she died.

Etheldreda is central to the Withburga story: when Etheldreda died in Ely in 679, her sister Sexburga took over as abbess; in 695 Etheldreda's body was exhumed, found incorrupt and translated into the church. When Sexburga died in 699 she was buried next to her sister Etheldreda and her own daughter, Eorminilda, succeeded her.

Bede also mentions Saethryd, Anna's stepdaughter, but of any other daughter, Withburga, there is no mention. It is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that appears to provide our first mention of her

'In the same year the body of Wihtburh was found all sound and undecayed in DEORHAM, 55 years after she departed from this life' (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle *sub anno* 798 (Whitelock 1961).

The stories about Withburga, her identity, even her existence, need not be early, indeed could even be post-Conquest. However, most believe that Withburga was not mythical but was real (like many another local Anglo-Saxon saint) but with an identity which remains obscure. The apparently earliest reference to Withburga is in the F version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 798 which says that her incorrupt body was found in DEORHAM 55 years after her death (above). However, this was itself written in the late 11th or early 12th century at Canterbury, probably by a chronicler using a version of the late 9th century set of chronicles written at Winchester (Whitelock 1961). The Chronicle account, therefore, need not be independent but part of the creation of the cult.

If Withburga had been a daughter of Anna (died 654) it seems remarkable that she could have survived until 743, 89 years after her father's death and 44 years after the death of her sister Sexburga, and yet not have attracted the attention of Bede, writing in 731. Some caution is needed in reading the Chronicle entry. It is possible at some time there was a confusion between Withburga and Werburga (who was at Ely) and some muddling of their dates, but this is again speculation.

The *Liber Eliensis* (LE) a 12th century Ely compilation, which contains earlier material, includes the story of Edgar's refoundation of Ely in 970 with the help of Bishop Aethelwold of Winchester, with Brithnoth as first abbot, and also brings in Etheldreda's younger sister, Withburga and her bones.

This refoundation involved the creation by grant and gift of an estate to endow the monastery. (Probably the original monastic estate of the late 7th century was not scattered but a single block of land around Ely) (Miller 1951, 15, 25). The grants claimed in the 12th century to have been made in 970 by Edgar (no charter survives) and confirmed by Edward the Confessor in a document (which no longer survives) were recorded in the LE in the 12th century (LE 161-3), although probably based on a genuine charter of privileges and possessions (LE, 417-8). These may be based on genuine documents but this is not certain (Sawyer 1968 No 1051); the editor of the LE (E.O. Blake) called them spurious, but others were less doubtful; Hart (1966, 213) thought it was genuine. Anyhow, these grants mention many places, including Dereham, which must be East Dereham, the Domesday holding, and which was certainly Ely property in the later 10th century (LE II, 40n).

The cult of Etheldreda at Ely

The refoundation of Ely in 970 also involved Abbot Britnoth's strengthening of the cult of Etheldreda and her sisters at Ely. Rollason (1978) has shown that in the 10th century Reform movement, as much a political movement as religious, relic-cults were used as political tools to gain power, to gain protection and sometimes to reinforce a claim to the site of the relics. But this is a general explanation and the acquisition of relics was essentially to reinforce claims to spiritual leadership.

For the history of Ely, and its connection with Etheldreda and Withburga, the major source is *LE* compiled between 1131 and 1174, but incorporating earlier material. This may record Late Saxon traditions. As Susan Ridyard points out in her study of East Anglian saints and cults, there are two similar Lives of Withburga (one written after 1106) possibly from a common source, which may have been relatively late. It is possible that one of these was the source of the story about her in *LE*: her royal birth, virtuous youth, withdrawal to Dereham, her death and burial, and her translation after 55 years into the church at Dereham. According to the *LE* (p 120-31, 145) the bones of Withburga from Dereham and Wendreda from March were obtained at about the same time. The theft of Withburga's relics in July 974 from Dereham need only be explained by the fact that this was or had been a family monastery and already had her two sisters, Etheldreda and Sexburga.

Sacra furta

According to the well-known tradition, Withburga's bones were stolen from Dereham by Abbot Britnoth (*LE* p120 -22); his monks came to Dereham, stole the relics, brought them to Brandon by road, and thence by boat to Ely. The accounts of the 'theft' of Withburga's body by Abbot Brithnoth do not lend particular favour to either Dereham, for Brandon would have been a reasonable place at which to transfer the

body to a boat, after an overland journey from either place, although distance somewhat favours East Dereham. Here it is worth noting that direct access to the Wissey at West Dereham would have involved a long upstream journey south of Welney.

The two references to the lengths of the overland and river journeys as '20 miles' may not be very significant, although the distances between West Dereham and Brandon, and Brandon & Ely (Turbutsey Farm) are roughly similar, while East Dereham to Brandon is considerably greater.

When the church at Ely was rebuilt, Withburga's bones were moved to a better position, in 1106, and it is perfectly possible that this was the occasion for a new, or even first, Life of Withburga to be written, and then find its way into LE. Both the translation of relics in 1106 and subsequent *Lives* point to a belief in the existence of Withburga and her identity with the bones.

The argument that the Late Saxon connection of Ely with East Dereham must place Withburga's cell (accepting her existence) at East Dereham is tempting, but of course, the proprietary connection could also have prompted the legendary connection to be made by Ely historians in the 12th century, to enhance pilgrimage and trade at their manor. The story may not be a record of events (it is clearly embroidered) but an explanation for a medieval audience. The story has a seeming contradiction in that it shows the relics being taken by force from Dereham, which seems unlikely and unnecessary if East Dereham had been the property of Ely at that time (AD974).

The medieval legend and the 'well'

It is clear that by the late middle ages the legend was firmly attached to East Dereham, where there was a guild to the saint and where the churchyard has a 'holy well' set against the west wall of the church. Tom Martin, the Thetford antiquary, wrote in his *Church Notes* for 1781 that there were two springs in the churchyard at Dereham, one called the 'Baptisterium' which rose from under the west end of the church (his plan shows that he means the present day 'well'), and the other called St Withburga's Well 'two stones cast' from the 'Baptisterium'.

Blomefield (1810, 215) says that 'at the west end of the churchyard are the remains of a very ancient baptistery, over which was formerly a small chapel, dedicated to St. Withburga. At the east end of the baptistery there is now remaining a curious old Gothic arch, from which runs a spring of clear water, formerly said to have many medicinal and healing qualities. The fabulous account is that this spring took its rise in the churchyard from the place where St Withburga was first buried. In the year 1752 it was arched over and converted into a cold bath'. In a footnote he adds 'At some distance from the churchyard is another spring called St. Withburga's Well.'

The bath house was rebuilt in 1792 and demolished by Rev. Armstrong in 1855 who restored the medieval structure as it now stands. It is clear that some element of confusion over the names of the springs has come about. There were certainly two springs in the 18th century, as Martin's directions made clear, but the location of the second is lost. It was presumably somewhere in the area of the present-day allotments. The application of the name Withburga's Well to the 'Baptisterium' alone may not have come about until after the 1855 restoration.

East Dereham and West Dereham

The association of East Dereham and Ely in the 11th century, possibly the late 10th century, is no sure guide to any early connection, or to any special status for East Dereham. The eleventh century estates of Ely had no definite continuity from the pre-Danish estates. One can only dimly perceive the tenurial and political changes brought by the conquest of the Eastern Danelaw by the tenth century West Saxon kings." (Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* 1988, 184). The genuine Late Saxon connection with Ely could be the reason for the legendary connection, rather than the reverse.

There is no recorded evidence of Middle Saxon activity at East Dereham, but this is poor negative evidence in view of the fact that we are dealing with a town that has few areas of open and examinable ground, and that archaeological observations of building sites have been lamentably few. In addition there have been no formal excavations. Nevertheless, at present we have no evidence. In this regard it is very regrettable that no archaeological work was done during the reflooring of St Nicholas' church in 1988.

If we know of no archaeological evidence for early Christian activity at East Dereham and have no independent support for the status of the town, there is evidence of Middle Saxon (*i.e.* 650-850) activity at West Dereham in field around the parish church. This has been in the form of Ipswich ware sherds, but perhaps more significantly, fragments of imported Tating ware have also been recovered. This fine pottery, rare in England, has no defined connection with pre-Danish monasticism, but it is consistently associated with sites which in one way or another can be suggested as 'high status' or potentially so.

West Dereham as the site of an early monastery cell is also given some support by the frequent association of Middle Saxon sites with water, whether it be sea, river or marsh. Ely, Peterborough, Crowland, Iken (Suffolk) the recently excavated and probably monastic sites at Brandon and Burrow Hill, Butley (Suffolk), *Cnobheresburg* (Caister on Sea or Burgh Castle) and perhaps even St Benets, Horning. On the west Norfolk fen edge two other sites, at Bawsey and Wormegay, have recently produced artefacts suggestive of a monastic presence. It is quite possible that Ely had land in West Dereham before the late 9th century and that the Danish settlement and the Edwardian reconquest had severed the link, but again this is speculation with little supporting evidence.

West Dereham and Holkham

There is also the intriguing connection between the medieval abbey at West Dereham (founded 1188) and Holkham in North Norfolk on the edge of the sea marshes where the abbey had rights over the church in the middle ages; the church at Holkham is dedicated to Withburga (the only one except for a chapel at East Dereham). James Bentham (1771) claimed Holkham was once *Withburga stow* in his *History and Antiquities of Ely*.

The lack of any known claim connecting West Dereham with Withburga suggests that this dedication was not the result of a medieval effort to make West Dereham the site of Withburga's cell, although such dedications to local English saints are usually post-conquest in origin. Whether it represents some more ancient link is also not known. [In 1201 King John confirmed the grants of half the church at Holkham and of the church at Ringland to West Dereham Abbey (Cal. Ch. Rolls 2 John; VCH I, 414)].

The old village at Holkham has been swept away by the park; the church remains but what invites speculation is the earthwork in the sea marshes; although of Iron Age origin it could easily have provided a site and enclosure for a small monastic cell in a position similar to the monastic site at Burrow Hill Butley Hill, Suffolk.

Conclusions

One cannot deny that by the late Medieval period the cult of Withburga was being actively promoted at East Dereham and that no rival claims were being put forward by West Dereham, not even by the Premonstratensian house there. By suggesting West Dereham one flies in the face of an ancient tradition, but there is no evidence firm evidence in favour of either East or West Dereham. At the present state of our knowledge we tend towards West because of the available evidence for a Middle Saxon presence there, because of the link with Holkham, or Withburgastow, and because in topographical terms West is a more convincing candidate. The possible Minster status of East Dereham however, might prove significant in the search for Withburga and provide a link to a distant past.



Figure 1. East Dereham showing the location of the development site. Scale 1:5000

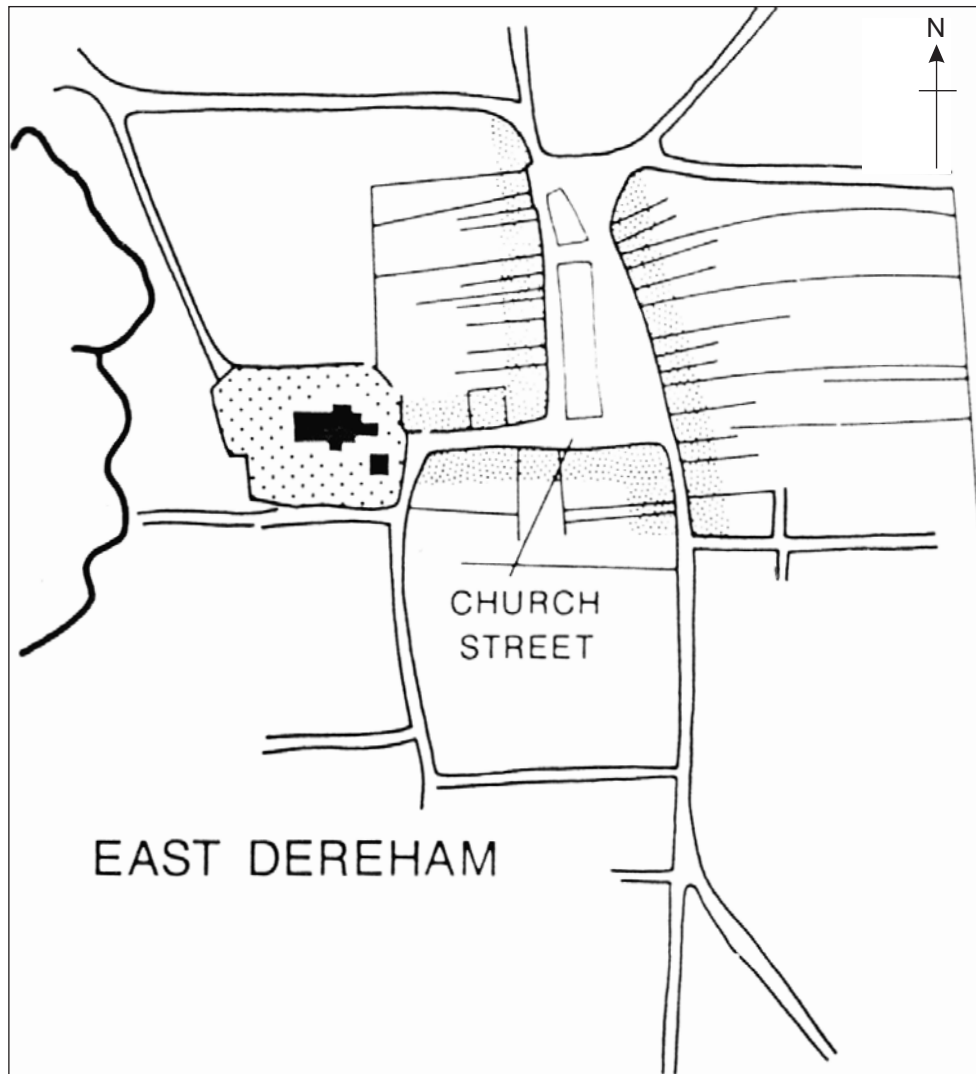


Figure 2. East Dereham, showing position of church (black) and churchyard (open Stipple). Scale 1:5000

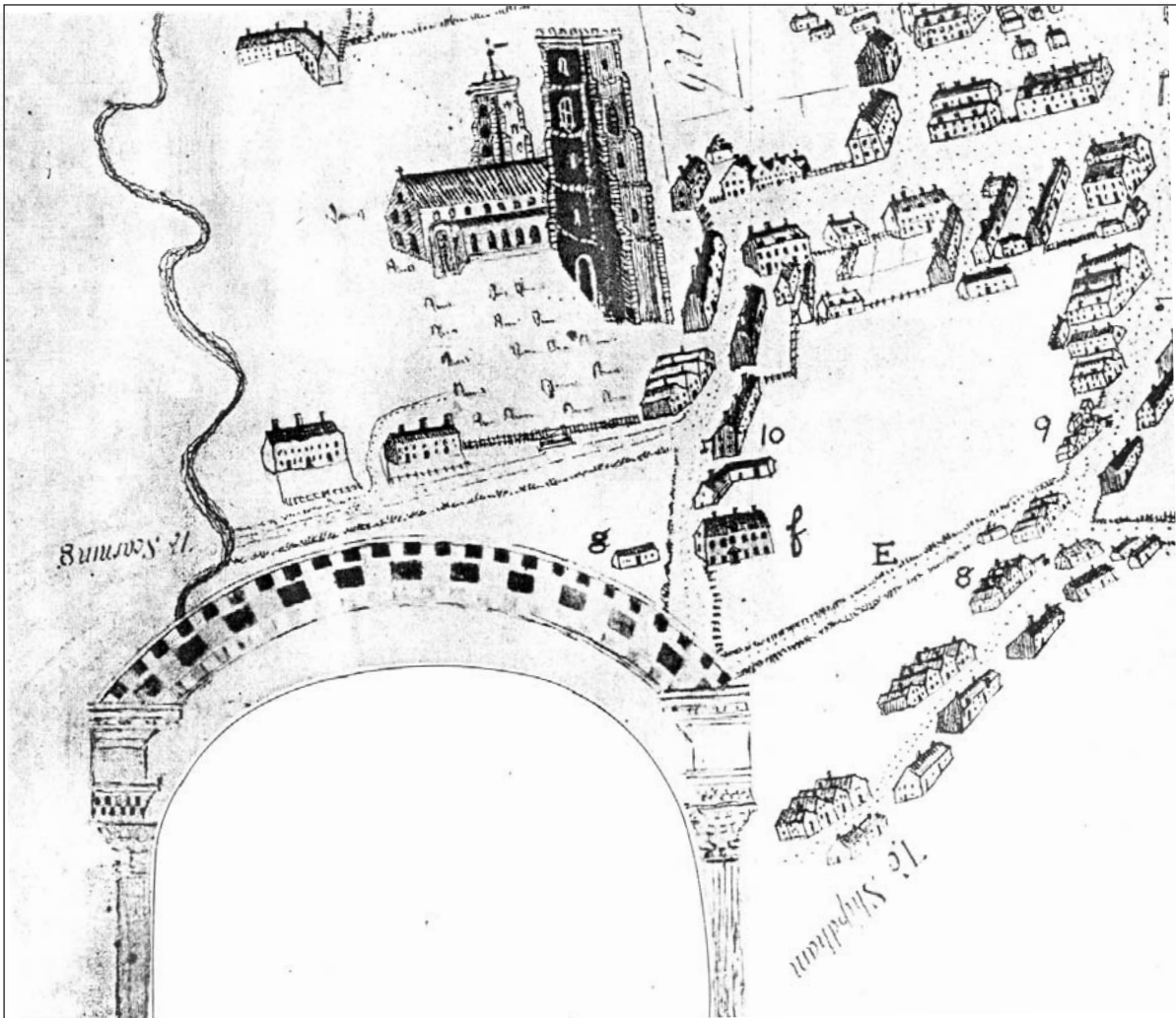


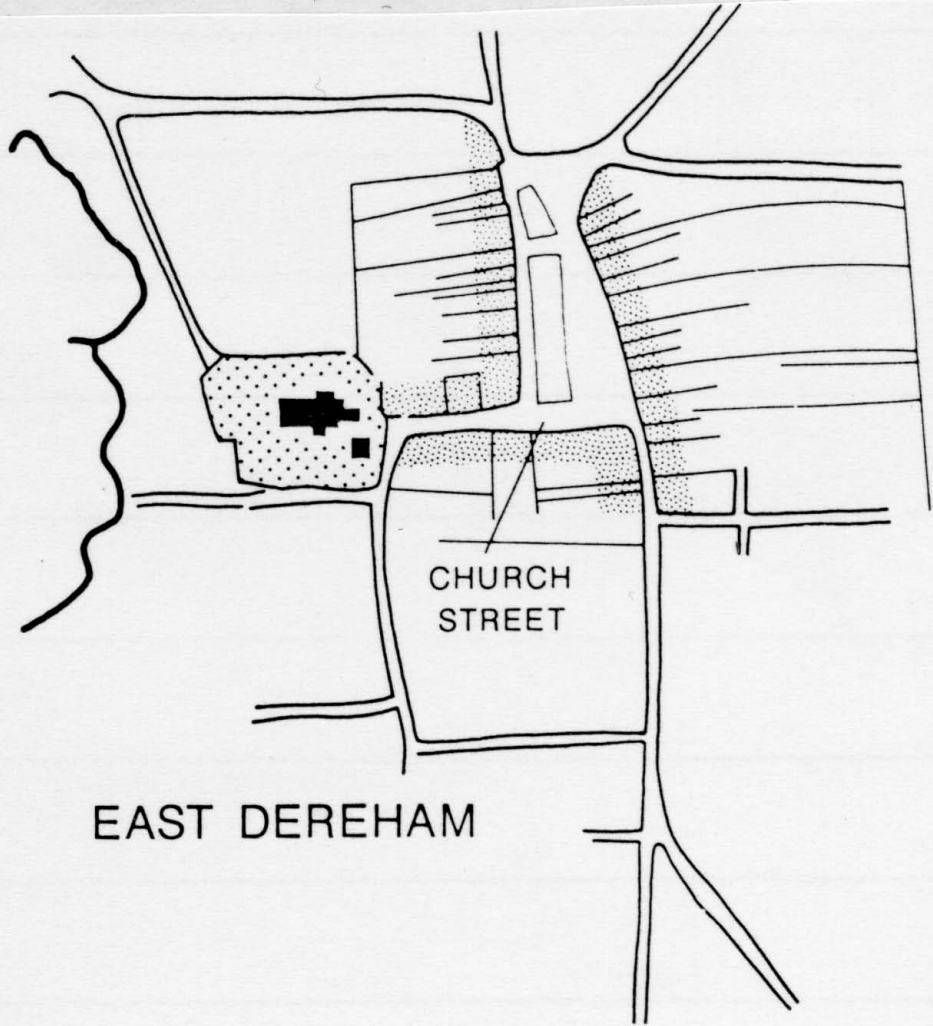
Figure 3. Map of c. 1757, showing the church, Guildhall (f), 'tithe barn' (g) and row of buildings (10)



Figure 4. Enclosure map of 1812 showing the development site.
Not to scale

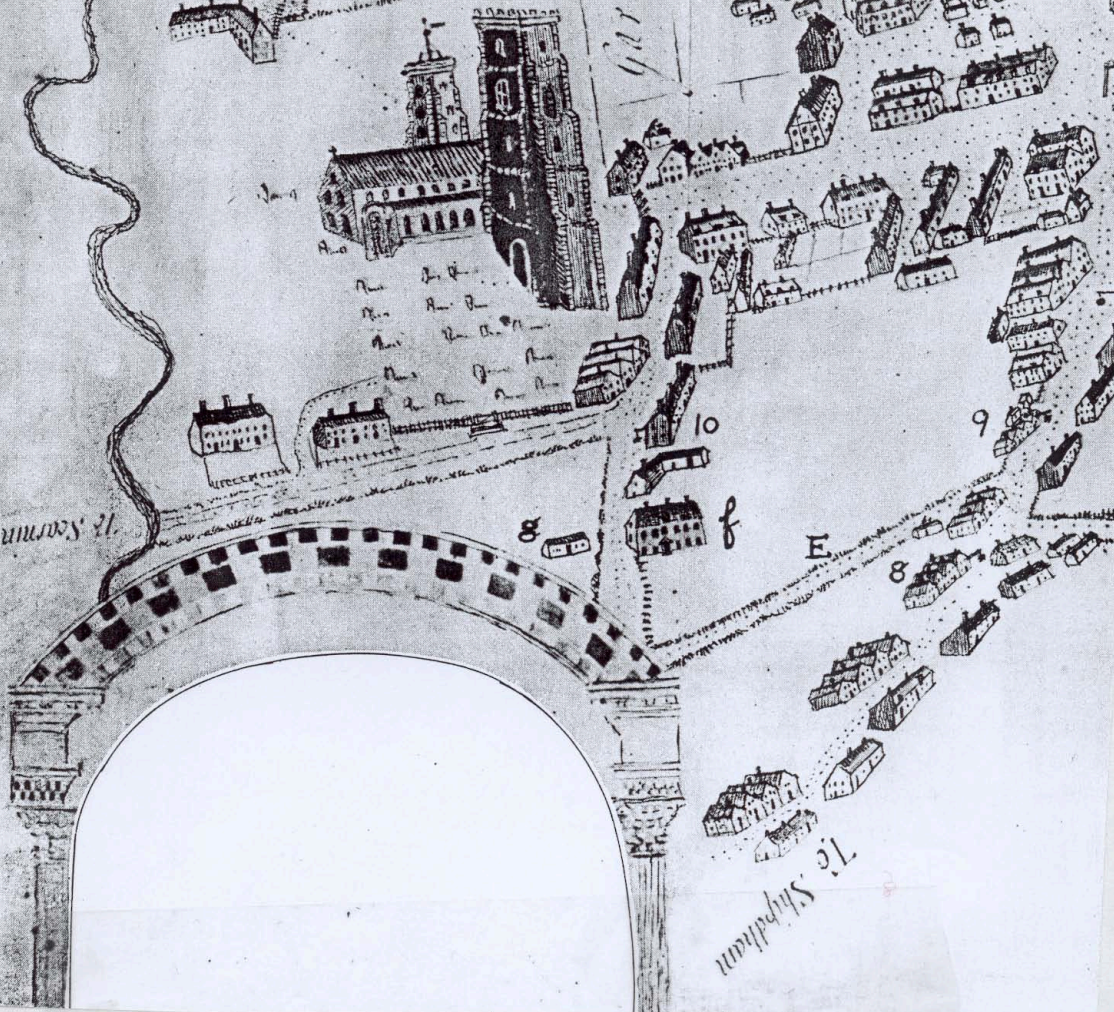


Figure 5. Ordnance Survey map of 1928 showing the development site. Not to scale



EAST DEREHAM

Summers 21.



To Stephen

2.1.13

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late
Lady Ferr
5.1.21

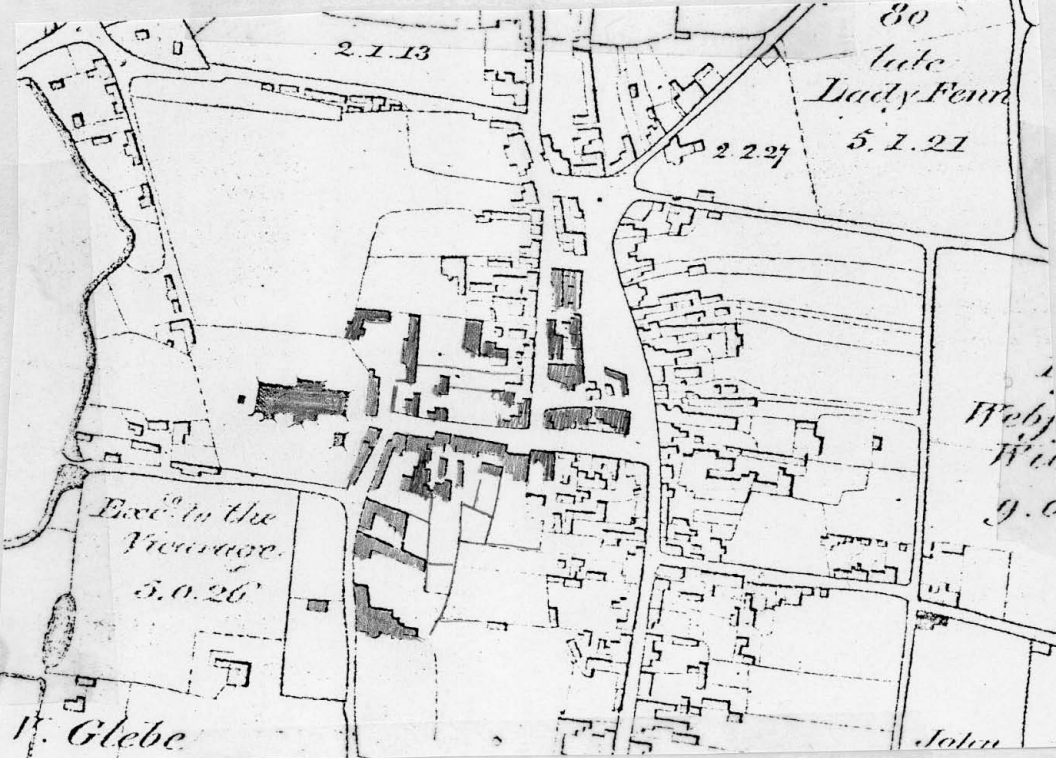
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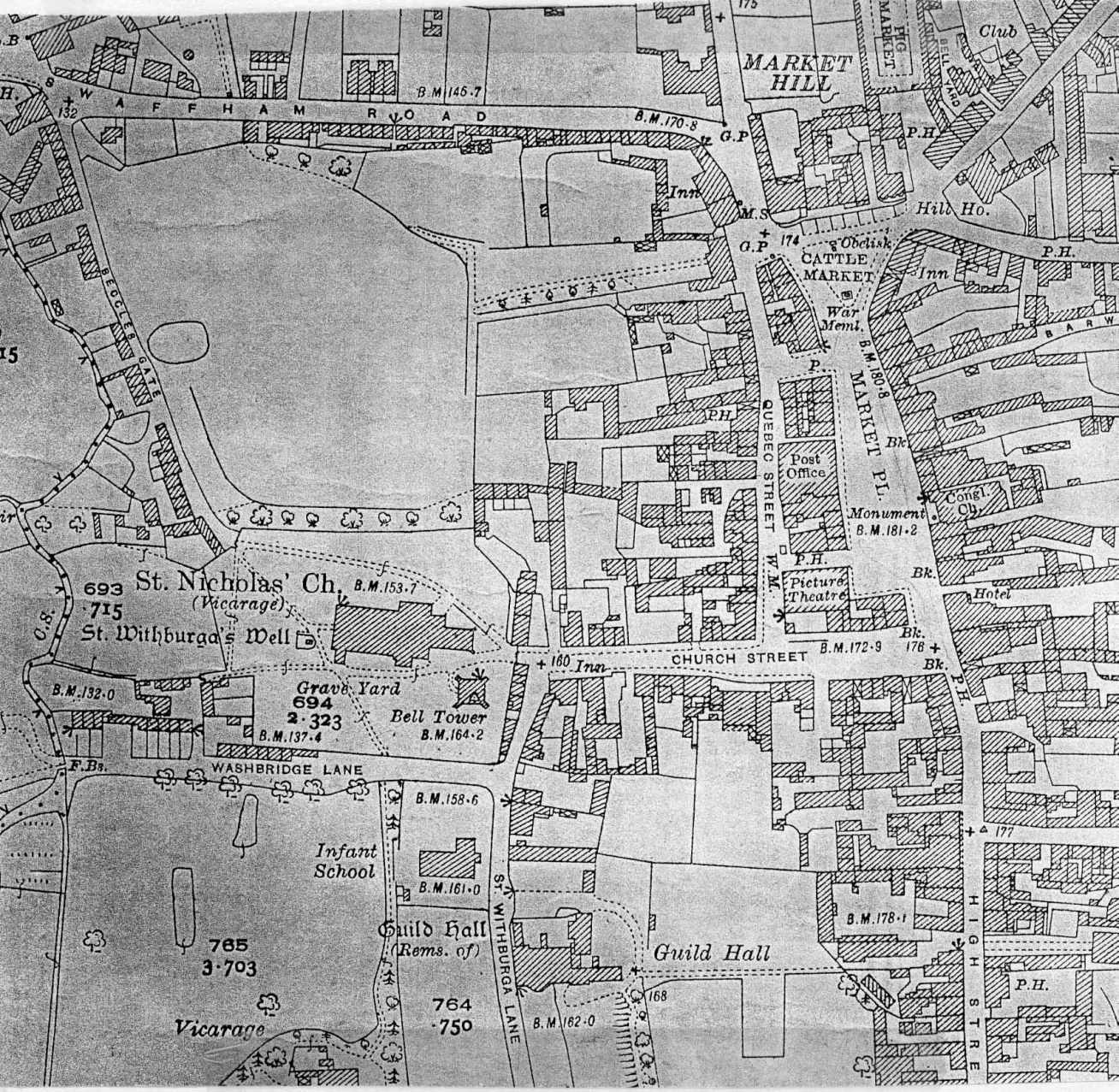
Reby
W
9.0

Exc^{to} to the
Vicarage
5.0.26

W. Glebe

John





MARKET HILL

693 St. Nicholas' Ch.
715 (Vicarage)
St. Withburga's Well

Grave Yard
694
2 323
Bell Tower
B.M. 164.2

Infant School

Guild Hall
(Rems. of)

Guild Hall

785
3-703
Vicarage

764
750

W A F F H A M R O A D

G.P.

CATTLE MARKET

Post Office

Monument
B.M. 181-2

P.H.

Picture Theatre

CHURCH STREET

WASHBRIDGE LANE

ST. WITHBURGA LANE

MARKET PL.

Club

Hill Ho.

Inn

Hotel

P.H.

B.M. 145.7

B.M. 170.8

G.P. 174

B.M. 169.8

B.M. 172.9

178 +

B.M. 153.7

B.M. 132.0

B.M. 137.4

B.M. 158.6

B.M. 161.0

B.M. 162.0

168