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Crowland Abbey. West Doorway.

To show particularly the Quatrefoil illustrating its traditional history.

(From a negative by Mr. H. E. Cooper.)

CROWLAND ABBEY.

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(Paper read to the members of the Northamptonshire Natural History Society on the occasion of their visit to Crowland, July 18th, 1929.)

PERHAPS no place that has watched the passing of twelve centuries can show to modern generations so little contemporary history as Crowland. All its original charters were destroyed by fire in 1091, and of the chronicles, only two survive—one of the eighth and the other of the twelfth century. Several histories have been compiled by its monks and abbots who worked from legend and tradition, but the most detailed, that of Ingulf, the famous first Norman Abbot, has been recently exposed as a forgery of much later date. But in the carvings upon its West front, Crowland carries for ever an invaluable record of its past, which posterity may read and interpret.

The coming of Guthlac, the patron saint, to Crowland in the eighth century, is one of the most picturesque incidents of early history, for there is an austerity and mystery in this first hermit of the fen country, seeking a place for meditation and self-discipline in the swamps which were shunned with terror by ordinary men.

“Then,” says a chronicler, “he came to a great marsh, situated upon the eastern shore of the Mercians ; and diligently enquired the nature of the place. A certain man told him that in this vast swamp there was a remote island, which many had tried to inhabit but had failed on account of the terrible ghosts there. This island was called ‘Cruland,’ and none heretofore had dared to live there because of the demons and spectres that haunted it. In the island there was a grassy mound, with a cave in the side of it, and here the servant of God began to make his habitation”(1).

The lower section of the quatrefoil of the great W. entrance shows the arrival of the saint in his boat, accompanied by his friend Cissa, and rowed by Tatwin—who afterwards, inspired by his master’s example, became likewise a religious, and is now immortalised by a carving on the W. front of Thorney Abbey. The middle section shows Guthlac’s dealings with the demons who came to torment him. Triumphant through the power of the Spirit, he chastised them with whips and forced them to cut stone at Barnack to build his cell. From these symbols arose the Crowland arms, three knives and three whips, quarterly. The right-hand section shows his death ; and the upper, his apotheosis, realistically portrayed as a struggle for his body between a devil and an angel. The left-hand section shows women weeping at his shrine—one of them probably the daughter of Offa, King of the Mercians.

(1) Matthew Paris. *Chronica Maiora*, I, 325.

The statues around the great W. window depict prominent figures in the early history of the Abbey, together with the apostles. On the left is King Ethelbald of Mercia, who in 714 founded the monastery on the site of S. Guthlac's cell (this was at the S.W. corner of the present church, but nothing now remains of it). Beside him is Kenulph, the first abbot. These two together laid the foundations of the vast Benedictine house—home of an order expressly instituted “for places remote from concourse of people”—to carry on the work of the saint in exorcising the demons of the fens, and bringing civilisation to the primitive and amphibious inhabitants. Building and improvements went on into the fifteenth century, and the present churchyard and waste ground on the South were the site of the cloisters, chapter-house, dormitories, offices and refectory. Only the ruins of the great nave and choir remain, with the single delicate arch at the E. end, miraculously preserved intact when a slight earthquake and thunder-storm brought down much of the surviving ruins in the last century; this arch was just behind the High Altar.

Inside the present church, on the right of the entrance, is the memorial stone of William of Warmington, one of the great master-masons.

The chief interest of the early-mediaeval history of the monastery lies in the bitter controversies with neighbouring religious houses over their respective boundaries in the fens. Desolate as were the surrounding swamps, they were nevertheless coveted possessions. “The marsh is very necessary for man,” writes a monk of Peterborough, “for there are found wood and twigs for fires, hay for fodder of cattle, thatch for covering houses, and many other useful things. It is, moreover, productive of birds and fishes” (2). The Abbots of Crowland and Peterborough, the lords of Holland and Deeping, and the Prior of Spalding eyed each other warily across the fens, jealous of any encroachment on their right of turf and rush-cutting, fishing and fowling. From 1189, when the first lawsuit took place, to the fifteenth century, armed affrays were frequent. The enemies of Crowland besieged the Abbot in his monastery, levied unjust tolls upon merchants going to his fair, ambushed his officials and threw them into the swamps. Many times he escaped and hurried secretly to London to show his charters to the King; and in later days, trained lawyers were employed to press his cause, legend relating that comforting visions of S. Guthlac appeared to cheer their more depressed moments. Traces of these struggles remain in the “S. Guthlac's Stones” to be found in the neighbourhood—boundary-marks set up by royal command to define the limits of the isle of Crowland.

(2) Hugh the White. Quoted Victoria County History, Lincs. II, 107.

By the eleventh century the shadow of the great monastery had spread far beyond these local limits, and covered estates in the five shires of Lincoln, Northampton, Cambridge, Huntingdon and Leicester. Many kinds of men gave their lands "to God and S. Guthlac," for the good of their souls, and among the benefactors are earls, a countess, knights, a cook, a chancellor, a butler, a courier, and a sheriff. Earl Waltheof of Northampton gave Barnack, with its valuable quarries to the monastery, and after his execution in 1076 he was buried in the chapter house. His effigy appears on the right of the W. window. Turketul, another Saxon benefactor, is shown on the left, having given three manors in Wellingborough, Elmington and Worthorpe. Crowland possessed other estates also in Northamptonshire—a manor at Addington and lands at Badby. In Queens' College, Cambridge, which came in possession of one of the Crowland estates at the dissolution of the monasteries, there survive documents (3) which illustrate the character of the monastery's administration as the landlord of widely scattered communities. The Abbot's Steward, accompanied by a party of monks, made constant tour of the estates, holding about six courts a year, auditing the manorial accounts, and superintending the gathering-in of the harvest and the assessment of tithes. This system maintained a steady central control over possessions some thirty or thirty-four miles away from the parent abbey; while the details of their local government were in the hands of the reeve, hayward, and bailiff. Crowland, like most of the Benedictine monasteries, was a great sheep-farming centre; and each of her manors was part of a highly centralised system of wool-growing. The breeding of sheep and the production of raw material for England's staple industry engrossed the energies of the monks at home and the tenants of the most remote manor; and the wool-clip of the outlying estates was "navigated" upon rafts every year to Crowland, there to be sold to the merchants of King's Lynn, who distributed it to the English or Flemish weavers. That the Crowland administration was kindly is shown by the fact that upon none of her manors was there any sign of the Peasants' Revolt, save at Wellingborough, where the tenants besieged the Abbot's bailiff in the manor house, and tried to burn it. The Abbey seems to have been a centre of learning and a refuge for the distressed at all times of its history; an austere sentinel against barbarism and an outpost of progress in one of the most desolate and benighted regions of England. During the war after the Provisions of Oxford, the last hope of the remnant of "Disinherited" barons lay in the support of the monks of Crowland, who sent to their fortress in the Isle of Ely vast supplies of provisions. In the Wars of the

(3) By courtesy of the President and Fellows I have been allowed to make an extensive examination of these.

Roses, the Abbey received armies of refugees from all the surrounding country, while masses and processions were organised daily for the restoration of peace and the retreat of the approaching armies. The visitation-articles of the Bishop of Lincoln show a high standard of religious and educational life. "It was indeed," says a chronicler, "a very castle of the gospel." Many of the monks were sent to Cambridge to study law and theology, and the hostel which they received royal permission to build became, in later days, Magdalene College.

At the Dissolution in 1539, Crowland was at the height of its power. The monastic ideal has no appeal for modern generations, but it is to the great religious houses of Lincolnshire and E. Anglia that England owes much of the drainage, cultivation, and above all, civilisation, of the fenland regions. Setting completely aside their doctrinal principles, we must admit to their honour that they brought light and humanity into dark places.

(A paper by Mr. H. W. Harrison, descriptive of the ruins and present Church, with photograph by Mr. G. F. Skinner is held over for the December number of the Journal.)

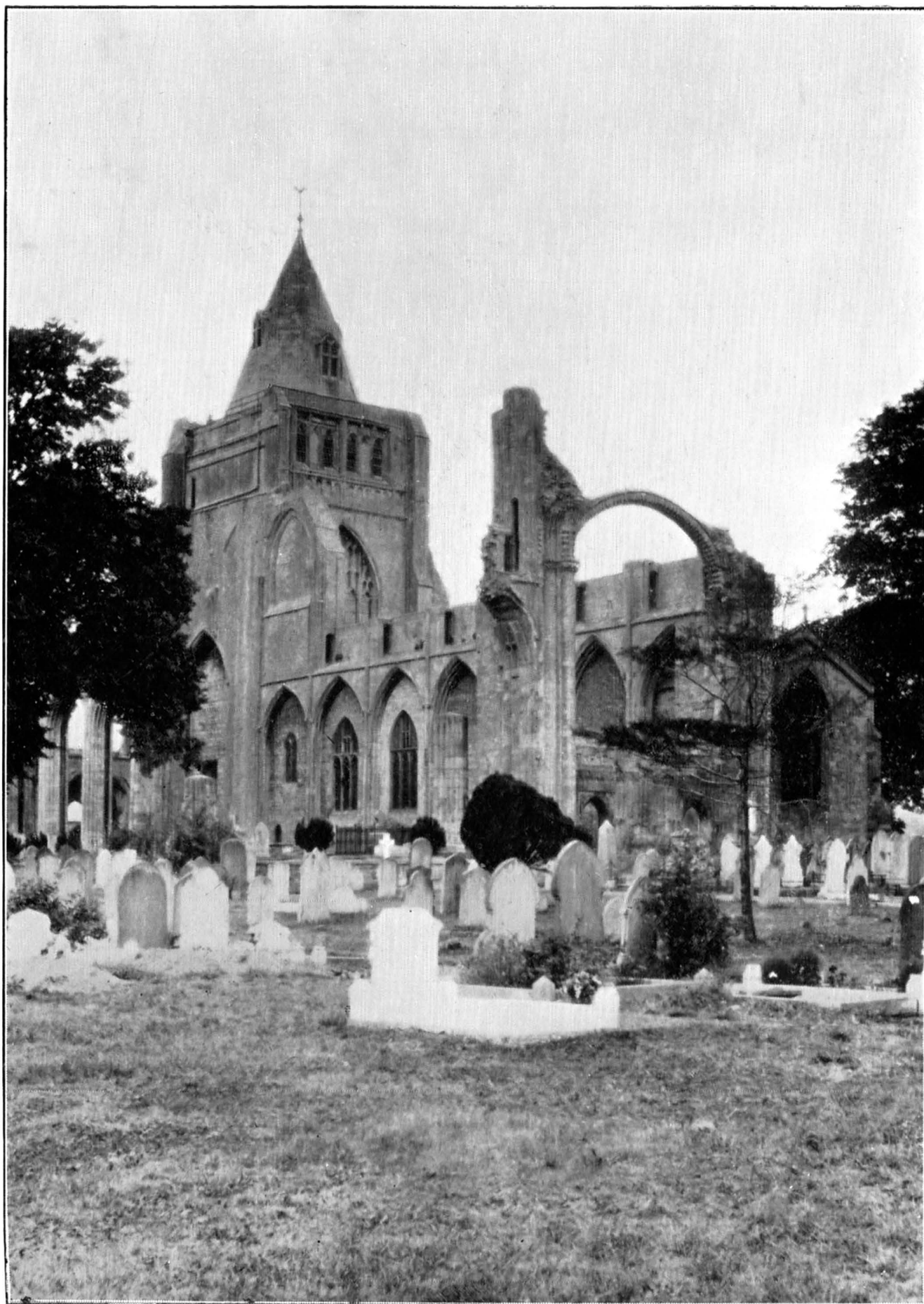


Photo : Mr. G. F. Skinner.

Crowland Abbey from the South-east.