

## The Living Classroom

From the Iron age to the Romans, Saxon warlords, Norman bishops, Elizabethan courtiers and generations of ordinary working farmers, they have all played their part in this landscape.

South Elmham Minster, this ruin and its strange fortified enclosure has long been the subject of debate amongst historians and archaeologists very little is known with any real certainty. This makes it all the more fascinating, it has been described as “One of the most enigmatic and romantic ruins in England.” It is a church or chapel of almost unique design in this country, one of the others being at North Elmham in Norfolk.

IN 1094 the newly created bishop of East Anglia, Herbert de Losinga, had a residence here, he had been a monk and it may be he founded the Minster as a small religious community where he would feel comfortable.

Around 1100 Herbert gave the manor of South Elmham to his new foundation of Norwich Cathedral Priory.

The enclosure may pre-date the ruin, indeed it may be the reason it was built there. Possibly a Roman camp or farmstead, pottery of that period is commonly found in the fields around. Some sort of Iron Age camp has even been suggested.

However today most historians think that the enclosure may be contemporary with the ruin, emphasising the importance of the Minster church in the landscape, much as a moat would to a later medieval manor house.

By the 13th century the Minster was in ruins and activity moved to the top of the hill along an ancient lane that follows the ridge. This had been the site of a Saxon settlement, pottery and other artefacts have been found. In the 7th century Felix the Burgundian brought Christianity to the kingdom of East Anglia he was thought to have been based at Dunwich. In 673 a second Bishop was appointed possibly based here, or at North Elmham, or both. The Minster was long thought of as a Saxon Cathedral as was the chapel at North Elmham. It was this association with the early church that led Bishop Herbert here, and this association continued throughout the middle ages until the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century.

The principle attraction of South Elmham to the medieval bishops was hunting. A deer park had been established, not without a few local difficulties. In 1315 John Bishop of Norwich complained of persons who broke into his park and poached his deer. In 1350 the Abbess at nearby Flixton complained of the Bishop's hunting parties, who trampled the Abbey gardens.

A community developed in and around the moated enclosure. Detailed accounts were kept and forty-five of these account rolls survive, all but four are now in the Suffolk Record Office.

The records list a number of buildings, stables, mews, cloisters, a chapel, gatehouses (the ruin of one survives) and fishponds. The traces of these ponds form a series of earthworks to the south-west of the farm yard.

The Hall itself has probably the earliest

Domestic wall paintings in Suffolk, dating from 1270, there is a record of Bishop Roger de Skerning dying at South Elmham in 1278.

In 1387 Bishop Henry Despenser was granted “a licence to crenellate” or fortify his house here.

Despenser had been involved in putting down the Peasants Revolt in Norfolk

Foxes Martyrs tells us that in 1399 the same Bishop Despenser tried a local lollard William Sawtry in a court at South Elmham. The heretic recanted but was caught preaching in London not long after, he was burned at the stake.

Royalty was entertained from time to time in 1326 Edward II stayed and conducted the business of government from here for ten days or so on his way to Norwich.

There are other much more humble indications of every day life here. On the meadow marked as the common, there are the last remnants of "Greshaw Green."

Once this served as common land for the surrounding villages, you can still see the divisions between the "goings". You can also make out traces of houses and a farmstead on the edge of the green.

Down the hill along Debbs lane there are pits dug for clay for making bricks. Bricks were made here as early as the 14th century, a tradition that was carried on in St Cross until the last war.

The churches tenure of this land may have lasted nearly nine hundred years. It belonged to the Priory of Norwich for over four hundred, finally around 1540 with the dissolution of the monasteries, it was seized by the crown.

Henry VIII granted the manor to Edward, later Lord North, Treasurer of the Court of Augmentations. His grandson Sir John North, a soldier, scholar and sometime spy, lived here from time to time.

The house was remodelled and the first floor Great Hall altered, large windows were added, floors strengthened so that assembled gentry could view hunting in the park, and dine in splendour.

Unfortunately John North was never to inherit his father's title, he died in 1597.

In 1617 the North family sold the manor to Sir John Tasburgh.

The Tasburghs built St Peter's Hall, from the remains of Flixton Abbey, and later the much grander Flixton Hall. They were a Catholic family, not popular at the time.

In 1753 the manor was sold to the Adair family in whose hands it remained until 1920. South Elmham became as it is today, a farm. You can see by the layout of the hedges where the park was divided, some of the old parkland was ploughed in 1940. Some has never seen the plough, this, together with some venerable trees and hedges forms living remnant of a bygone age.

The story never ends, in fact it constantly changes. Historians re-assess, discover more documents, archaeologists make new finds or take another look at old ones.

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There are many subjects for discussion inspired by this landscape.

The Roman Occupation

Saxon East Anglia and the arrival of Christianity

Norman conquest and the changes it brought to rural England

The Feudal System, Peasants Revolt, Lollardry.

Commons their use and eventual enclosure.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries, why did it affect the Bishop of Norwich?

Elizabethan rural England.

What happened to the Tasburghs a Catholic family in the 17th & 18th century.

Three hundred years of agricultural development and economics.

A 20th century revolution in land ownership in the break up of large estates.