

Into the 21st Century

In 1991, the Nunnery, gardens and land that is now the Lakes Reserve were gifted to the Trust. During the development of the BTO's headquarters, all worked stone features were revealed and conserved. The original floor level can be seen in the exposed pit, with tiles that date back to the 14th Century. The south transept includes a curved staircase, in the thickness of the wall, which would have led to the nuns' sleeping quarters (known as the dorter). It also features a large Tudor fireplace, installed after the Reformation – as were the first-floor windows along the southwest wall. Ground-floor windows added at the same time are also visible. The gothic arch (see photo overleaf), has been glazed after being boarded up for many years. This impressive window provides a glimpse of the old barn which is now a suite of offices for Trust staff.



This magnificent building is now safely consolidated and has been given a new lease of life as the BTO Resource Centre and Chris Mead Memorial Library housed within the Max Nicholson Building.

Thanks

Ancient House Museum, Thetford, Norfolk
The Archive Centre, Norwich, Norfolk
Peter Tolhurst

Further reading

MARTIN, Thomas, *The history of the town of Thetford, in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk*, [Nichols, London, 1779]
PAGE, William (Ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Norfolk (Volume II)* [Boydell & Brewer Ltd, Suffolk, 1975]
TOLHURST, Peter, *Thetford in Ruins* [Black Dog Books, Norfolk, 1992]

Supporting the BTO

The BTO is the UK's leading bird research organisation. Over 40,000 birdwatchers contribute to the BTO's surveys. We collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 100 at its offices in Thetford, Stirling, Bangor (Wales) and Bangor (Northern Ireland), who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO's investigations are funded by government, industry and conservation organisations and through the generous support of our members and supporters.

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Cover picture: Nunnery Place Farm, engraving by Basire, 1779
The Chapter House, The Infirmary Ruin and St. George's Chapel engravings by Rev Wilkinson, 1822
The Place (late 19th Century), photo courtesy of Ancient House Museum, Thetford
All other photographs by Helen Kramer

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The History of the Nunnery of St George



**Headquarters of the
British Trust for Ornithology**

The Nunnery of St George

In the time of King Canute (1016–1035), Thetford was a town of great importance. It was the fifth largest town in England and, as the river was fully navigable and easily forded, it was extremely prosperous.



During this period, a Benedictine monastery was founded on this site by Uvius, the first abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, in memory of King Edmund who had fallen in a battle with the Danes at Nunn's Bridges. At first, the monastery thrived but the silting up of the river and subsequent loss of trade, put great pressure on the religious houses in the town. By 1160, the monastery was poverty-stricken and the two surviving religious members, Toleard and Andrew, asked to withdraw. At their suggestion, Benedictine nuns who were living at Lyng, took over the site. The Abbot assigned them the Thetford parish churches of St. Benedict and All Saints and all other assets that belonged to the abbey of Bury within the limits of Thetford. In return, the prioress *'undertook to be in all respects faithful and obedient to the abbot'*.

The Thetford nuns remained greatly in the shadow of the monks of St. Edmund and for two centuries even their food – cooked meat, 35 loaves of bread and 96 gallons of beer per week – were brought by cart from Bury St.



Edmunds. Eventually, in 1369, due to regular robberies and assaults on the servants and the occasional unsatisfactory state of the provisions on arrival, the nuns were provided with money, corn and barley to enable them to make their own bread and beer and to procure meat locally.

Between 12 and 20 nuns and their servants lived at the Nunnery at any given time. For many years they thrived, thanks largely to rent received from land at Lyng and to charitable donations, particularly from local aristocracy. However, by the 14th Century, visits from the bishop revealed that income was diminishing and by 1520 *'...the nunnery was very poor'*. The notes from these visitations also reveal interesting details about the private lives of the nuns, including a lawsuit in 1438 between Alice Weseham, the prioress, and the rector of Lyng with regard to a

land dispute and in July 1532, it was reported that *'Silence was scarcely observed as well as it ought to be in the refectory'*.

After the Dissolution

The Nunnery was dissolved in February 1537 and the Prioress, Elizabeth Hothe, was given a pension of £5, which she still received at the age of 100, when she was living *'as a good and catholic woman'*, in the parish of St. James, Norwich.

Just before the Reformation, many of the domestic buildings were destroyed by fire, which also damaged part of the Church. At this time, the property was privatised and bought by Sir Richard Fulmerston, a major landowner in the area and a relation of the Duke of Norfolk. The Nunnery was converted to a house, known as The Place and it is still possible to see the stone mullion windows that were added at this time. The next owner, Sir Edward Clere, entertained Queen Elizabeth I during her Anglian Progress on 27 August, 1578. Many architectural details from this period can be seen today, including window frames and a fireplace.

At the beginning of the 17th Century (c. 1610), a small country house was built next to the Chapel remains. Of this, the portal of the front door, which faces the Nunnery Garden, and the panelling of two rooms survive being incorporated into the current square house, which was built to replace it c. 1740.



Over the years, the land and buildings have been used for a variety of purposes, including farming, grain storage and threshing. In the early part of the 20th Century, the Chapel was turned into a stable by racehorse breeder and owner Marcel Varipati, but his enterprise failed during the Depression. Later, a grain dryer was installed and, for many years, the historic buildings were largely out of sight, concealed behind modern additions.



In the grounds of the House and Nunnery, stand further remains of the original 12th Century buildings. This is believed to have been the Infirmary (for both nuns and the local community) and a separate area for visitors. The outside stair to a first floor would have allowed the healthy nuns to visit the sick without risking close contact.

The Architecture

The oldest existing remains – the Church and the gable end of the Chapter House – date back to the late 12th Century. The design of the site would have been similar to other local Benedictine foundations, with cloisters between the current house and the Church. An L-shaped block of domestic buildings, refectory and kitchens on the



ground floor and sleeping quarters above would have occupied much of the house area and abutted the south transept.

The most important building at the Nunnery is the Conventual Church of St. George. This is the church built at the end of the 12th Century, when the nuns moved onto the site. The Church consists of a long nave, which extends an impressive 140 feet (43 metres). This runs east – west with a south transept. The north transept no longer exists but would have mirrored the south and arches would have vaulted across the nave. Sections of the original 12th Century wall still exist but the north wall was largely remodelled in the 15th Century.

