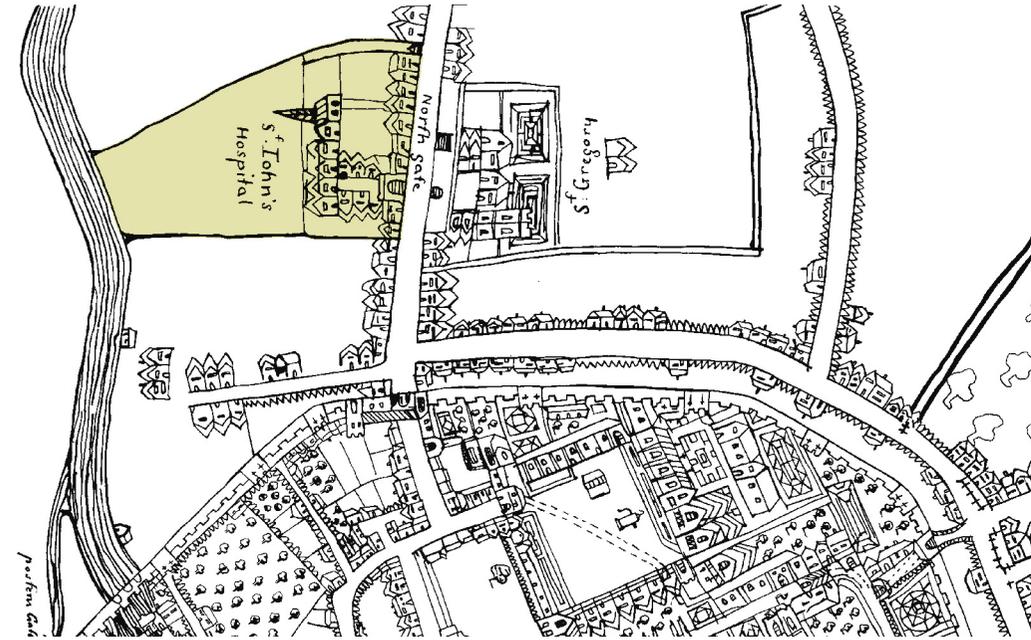


ST JOHN'S HOSPITAL 1084-1984



St John's Hospital from a plan of c1640.

THE HOSPITAL OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, NORTHGATE, CANTERBURY

Just outside the northern city walls of Canterbury lie the largely forgotten and neglected remains of one of a Pair of uniquely early almshouses. The Hospital of St John was founded together with the Leper Hospital of St Nicholas at Harbledown by Archbishop Lanfranc in 1084, or early in 1085, and is therefore almost exactly nine hundred years old. Apart from the Hospital of St Bartholomew at Chatham, near Rochester, which was founded at about the same time by Lanfranc's assistant and friend, Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester, no other hospital in Britain has such an early documented foundation date.

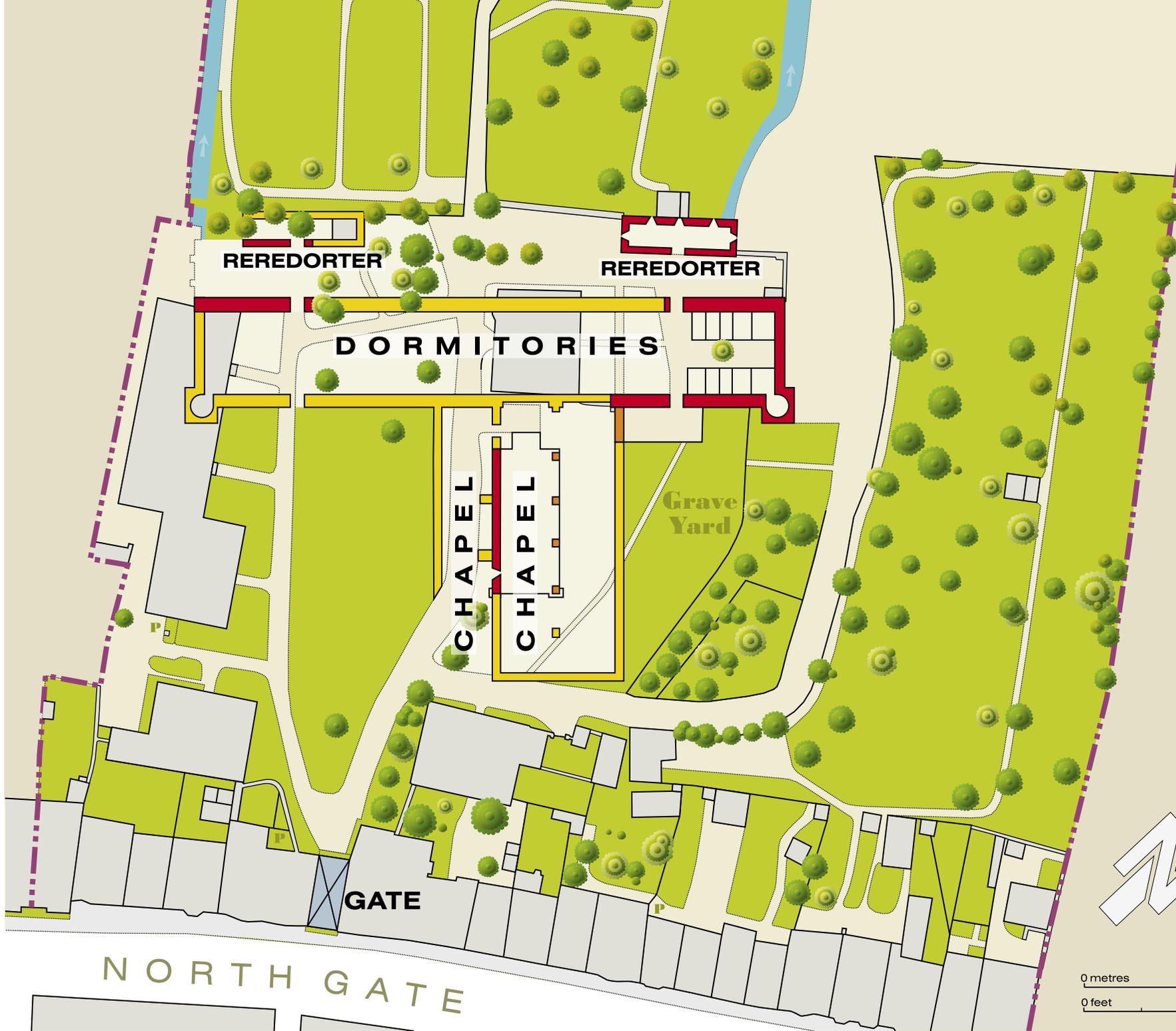
St John's Hospital, however, is not just a hospital with a very early foundation date, but also a hospital which still has the surviving remains of buildings (albeit now largely in ruins) going back to its foundation date. At the Hospitals of St Nicholas and St Bartholomew are only the scanty remains of the original late eleventh century apsidal stone chapels, but at St John's there are surviving ruins of a huge two hundred foot long double dormitory block, with a double chapel at right angles to it, as well as the ruins of two (one still largely intact) unique late eleventh century 'rere-dorters' (necessaria i.e. multi-seat privies). The double nature of the buildings at St John's Hospital reflect the original wishes of the founder that it should be for both thirty men and thirty women.

After surviving for almost exactly six hundred years the medieval buildings were unfortunately largely demolished in c1684. Correspondence between Archbishop William Sancroft and the Trustees sanctioning their demolition still survives in the Tanner MS in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Since c1684 the inhabitants have lived in little houses (rebuilt again in the nineteenth century) around a courtyard. Only part of one aisle of the chapel and fragments of the original dormitory and privy walls on the south (now the modern kitchen and refectory) are used in the present buildings. Recent survey work, however, has shown that two thirds of the northern privy block survived and was divided up to combine both the male and female privies in one building, presumably in the late seventeenth or eighteenth century when the Hospital had far fewer inhabitants.

ST JOHN'S HOSPITAL

Plan based on 1st Edition OS 1874





REREDORTER

REREDORTER

DORMITORIES

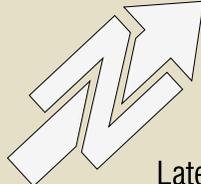
CHAPEL

CHAPEL

Grave
Yard

GATE

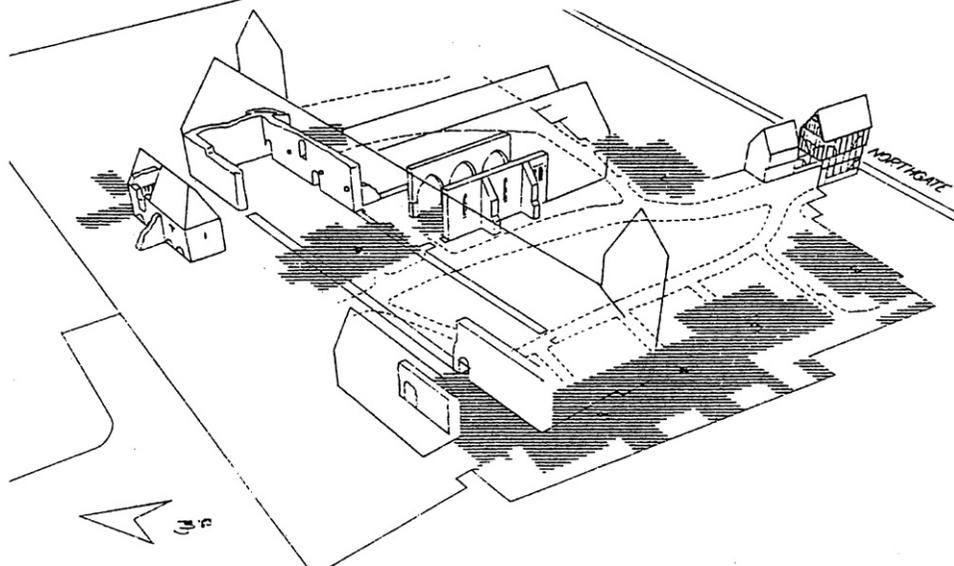
NORTH GATE



Late C11th 
Late C12th 

0 metres 30
0 feet 100

St John's Hospital - from west
showing extant medieval fabric



For the last three hundred years the ruins of Lanfranc's buildings on the north have been neglected. Lean-to sheds were built up against them and gradually the ivy took over. In 1983 the ruins were in very poor condition and heavily overgrown with vegetation. Unsightly sheds and garages encumbered them on the outside as well as rubbish and compost heaps, and an 'Anderson' shelter. Amazingly, the northern privy building, despite being largely buried in ivy, was still intact and housed two sheds (the uncovered northern end was a bottle and rubbish dump). A survey of this building carried out early in 1984 by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust showed it still had elements of its medieval roof as well as all its late eleventh century windows with wooden lintels (also about nine hundred years old) and parts of the seating for the floor above the original drain. This drain, which still has its four original round-headed arches on the north-west, ran into the River Stour (channels from both privy buildings survived until the late nineteenth century and are shown on the 1874 Ordnance Survey 1:500 map of Canterbury (see plan).

In the fourteenth century the privy block was in serious danger of collapse and all the walls on the inside were refaced at the bottom with ashlar blocks of Kentish rag and a large buttress was built in the centre of the north-west wall on the outside.

Much of the ruins of the great dormitory building also survive on the north (a first floor was inserted in the later medieval period). Here too, uniquely early features survive including a corner spiral stair-turret, one complete first floor window and an original doorway, also containing original timber lintels that support a 'tympanum' area. Despite the recent killing of the ivy on this portion of the ruins, the walls are urgently in need of conservation and consolidation if they are not to collapse. Many flints and sandstone boulders have fallen out in recent years and much of the mortar is very loose.

A detailed survey of the ruins has now been carried out by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and a programme of repair and consolidation is now being discussed between the Trustees and the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (the ruins have recently been made County Ancient Monument No. 382). It is hoped that work will start before too long and when this is complete a new garden will be laid out in the area of the ruins.

Tim Tatton-Brown
Revised November 1984

To our very Loving Friends Simon Louth Clerk, m^r of the Hospital of S
John Northgate nigh Canterbury, George Thorp, V. D. one of the Brethren
of Cant. & John Whitfield of Cant. Esq. Gentles. wherof we have receiv'd In-
formation from you the matter of y^e Hospital, & from Divers others who
have bene upon the place, yt there is within the sd Hospital an ancient & large
pile of Building (being in length about 100 Feet, & in breadth 27) commonly
call'd the Dormitory, & so use of old for the lodging (at th^r conceiv'd) of Stran-
gers, pilgrims, or others: wch is now become not only altogether useless (there
being otherwise sufficient provision within the sd Hospital for y^e habitation of y^e
Brethren, & Sisters of y^e same); but also very dangerous, it being so decay'd &
ruinous, yt tis every day like to fall in itself, wch if it should happen, would not
only endanger y^e Chappell & other parts of y^e Hospital adjoining, but also break
& spoil y^e materials, wch if they be taken down in time may be very usefull for
y^e repairs, & other use of y^e Hospital: upon Consideration hereof we have
thought fitt, & we doe hereby give full power, & Authority to you y^e sd Simon
Louth, Geo. Thorp, & John Whitfield, or to any two of you (wherof y^e sd
Simon to be one) forthwith upon the receipt hereof to cause y^e sd Dormitory
with y^e cloister adjoining, for so much of it, as it is best to be taken down, & y^e
materials to be either employ'd in repairing y^e rest of y^e Hospital, where there
is need, or to be sold to y^e best advantage; or else if you find it is your judgment
more beneficial to contract for y^e sale of y^e whole, or y^e several parts of it
upon the best price you can get, & hereof to give notice to us, as soon as it is
done, yt y^e whole profit, & benefit, wch shall either way arise, may be employ'd
wholly, as it ought according to y^e original Trust to y^e best & most Advantage
use of y^e sd Hospital, & y^e Brethren thereof: And for your so doing this shall
be your warrant Given under my Hand, & Seal here in Lambeth House
this 24th Day of January A. D. 1683.

W Lamb.

Letter from Archbishop William Sancroft to the Master of St John's Hospital (and others) authorising them to demolish the dormitory. Dated 24th January 1683 (ie 1684). Bodleian Library TANNER MS. 33 f204v.

Brief Bibliography

- VCH (Kent) II (1926) 211-2.
- DJ Hill, 'The Ancient Hospital and Almshouses of Canterbury' (1969) 7-15.
- WH Godfrey, 'Some Medieval Hospitals of East Kent' *Archaeological Journal* 86 (1930) 101-2 and 280-4.
- WH Godfrey, 'The English Almshouse' (1955) 33.