

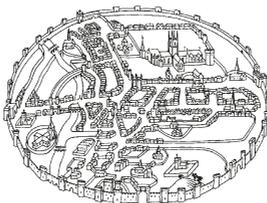


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# ST GREGORY'S PRIORY

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## CANTERBURY



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CANTERBURY ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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LANFRANCUS

# St. Gregory's Priory

excavation 1988 ~ 89

*Drawing of Lanfranc made in c. 1100.*

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Canterbury Archaeological Trust 1989

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# ST GREGORY'S PRIORY

## Introduction

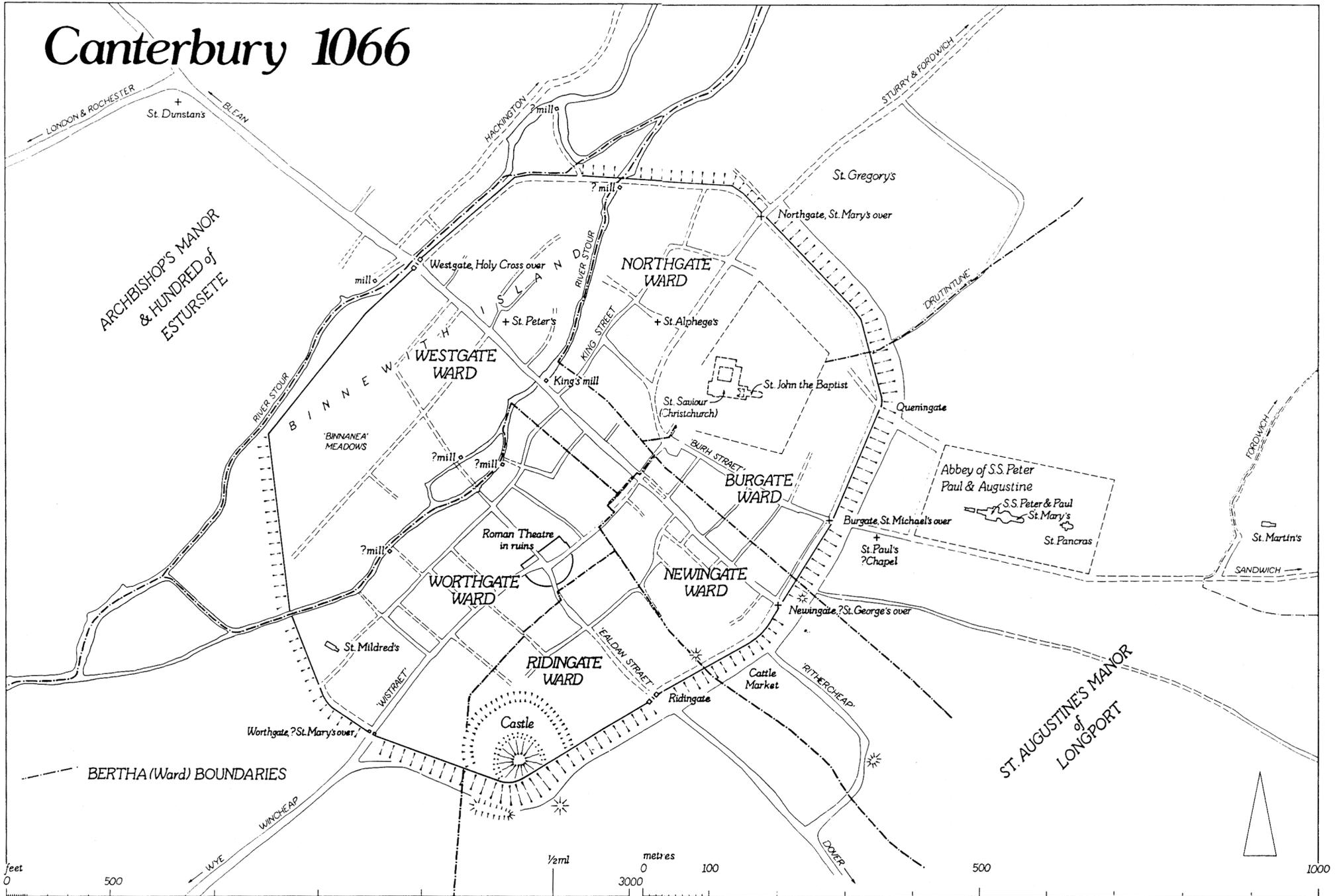
Until the Dissolution of the monasteries, much of the ground on the northeast side of the City of Canterbury was occupied by three very important religious houses: Christ Church, St Augustine's and St Gregory's. The history of Christ Church (the seat of the Archbishop) and of St Augustine's Abbey is very well-known, and it is a remarkable fact that both these houses have continuously recorded occupation from just after the arrival of St Augustine in 597 until the mid sixteenth century. Christ Church was refounded in 1541 and survives to this day. St Gregory's, on the other hand, is very little known. It was dissolved as a religious house in 1537, and only the late medieval Prior's House and a tower survived after this, as a large town house, until its final demolition in 1848. The complete area-excavation of the core of the site in 1988–9, before its almost total destruction by a proposed underground car park, is therefore a unique opportunity to record most of the surviving material remains.

## Anglo-Saxon Gild Church

To date all historians, who have looked at the quite large body of later medieval source material relating to St Gregory's have assumed that St Gregory's was a new priory founded by the first Norman Archbishop, Lanfranc, in the 1080s. The Priory was to act as a body of canons regular to look after the men and women of St John's Hospital, on the other side of Northgate street, which Lanfranc had founded at the same time. However, if one looks at the pages of Domesday Book, the very first entry under 'the land of the Archbishop of Canterbury' reads:

*In the City of Canterbury, the archbishop has 12 burgesses and 32 dwellings which the clergy of the town hold in their gild, and they pay 35 shillings, and have a mill worth 5 shillings.*

# Canterbury 1066



*Domesday Monachorum*, which was probably written only a short time after *Domesday Book*, records exactly the same information except that this property is now recorded as being held by 'the clergy of St Gregory for their church'. Lanfranc's foundation charter for St Gregory's can be dated to just before September 1087, so it is very likely that *Domesday Book* (1086) is the last record of an Anglo-Saxon gild of priests that was taken over and refounded by Lanfranc. One other piece of evidence is a will of 958 (of a man called Aethelwyrd) which refers to three fraternities (*gefescipas*). These were later taken to be Christ Church, St Augustine's and St Gregory's.

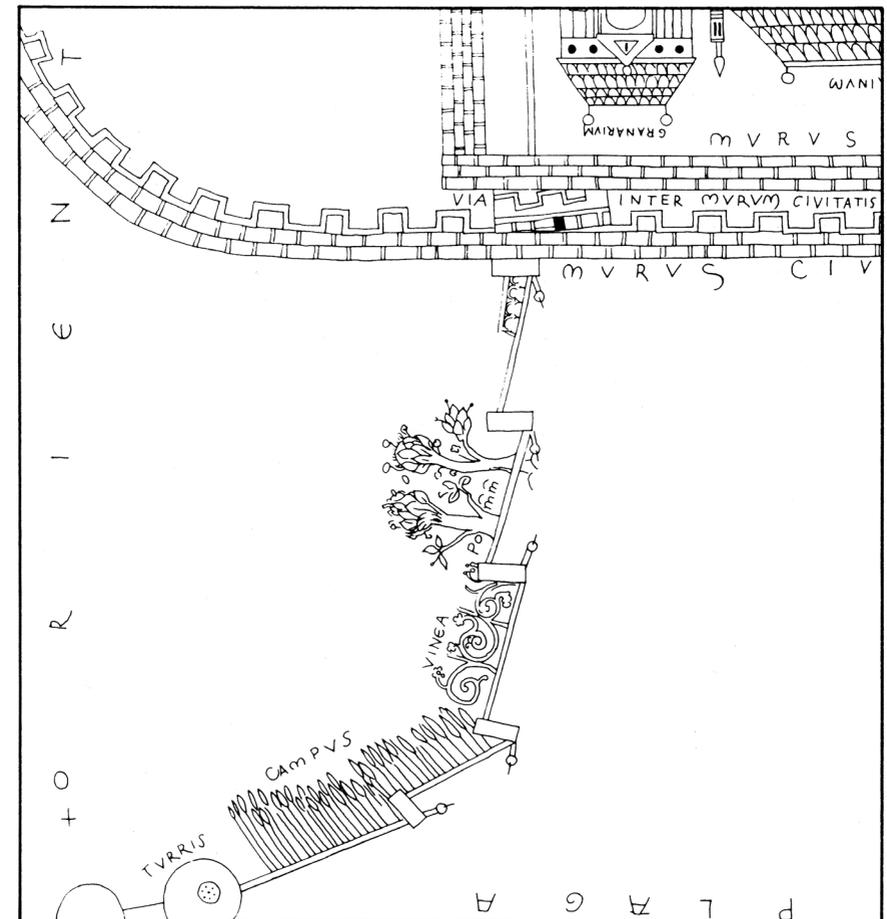
## Earliest Churches

The excavations in 1989 have just uncovered two Anglo-Saxon churches lying side-by-side and beneath the large aisled nave of the Nonnan Priory church. The larger of these churches, to the north, must be the gild church of perhaps a ninth- or tenth-century date, while the very small two-celled church to the south with an *opus signinum* floor must be earlier than this. The way its walls are constructed and the use of crushed brick for the floor surface perhaps suggest a date in the seventh century. A late Roman date is also just possible, though no trace of a Roman cemetery in the area has yet been found. The building, which faces slightly south of east, may perhaps be an early oratory chapel built just outside the Northgate of Canterbury, not long after the arrival of St Augustine. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) was of course, the Pope who sent St Augustine to convert the English, and soon after his death he was acclaimed a saint. The porticus chapel at St Augustine's Abbey, where all the earliest Archbishops were buried, was an early dedication to St Gregory, and it would therefore be a very appropriate dedication for a new chapel in Canterbury.

## Lanfranc's New Foundation

The 'Easter Table' Chronicle (a late addition to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) says that Archbishop Lanfranc had the body of St Eadburg (Ethelberga) translated from Lyminge to St Gregory's in 1085. Other sources, including the foundation charter of c. 1087, say St Mildred's body was also translated there at the same time (later a cause of much dispute with St Augustine's Abbey who also claimed to have St Mildred's body given them by King Cnut in 1027). William of Malmesbury and Eadmer also refer to a new settlement of canons 'who live by a rule' in the mid 1080s, so it is likely that Lanfranc was already starting to change the house of gild priests to a body of Canons regular when

he brought the relics from Lyminge. The foundation charter of c. 1087 implies a regular life for six canons (*presbiteros*), and their first responsibility was to the thirty men and thirty women of St John's Hospital on the other side of the road. They heard confession, did baptism and burial services and supervised a singing and grammar school. They were therefore taking over the duties of the earlier gild, and it is most interesting that among the many possessions granted to St Gregory's in the foundation charter are the churches of St Mary 'over the Northgate', Holy Cross 'over the Westgate' and St Dunstan 'outside the same Westgate'. These churches, which were shortly to become parish churches may in origin have been late Anglo-Saxon chapels attached to the larger gild church of St Gregory's.



Detail from the main 'waterworks' plan of Christ Church Priory, c. 1160.

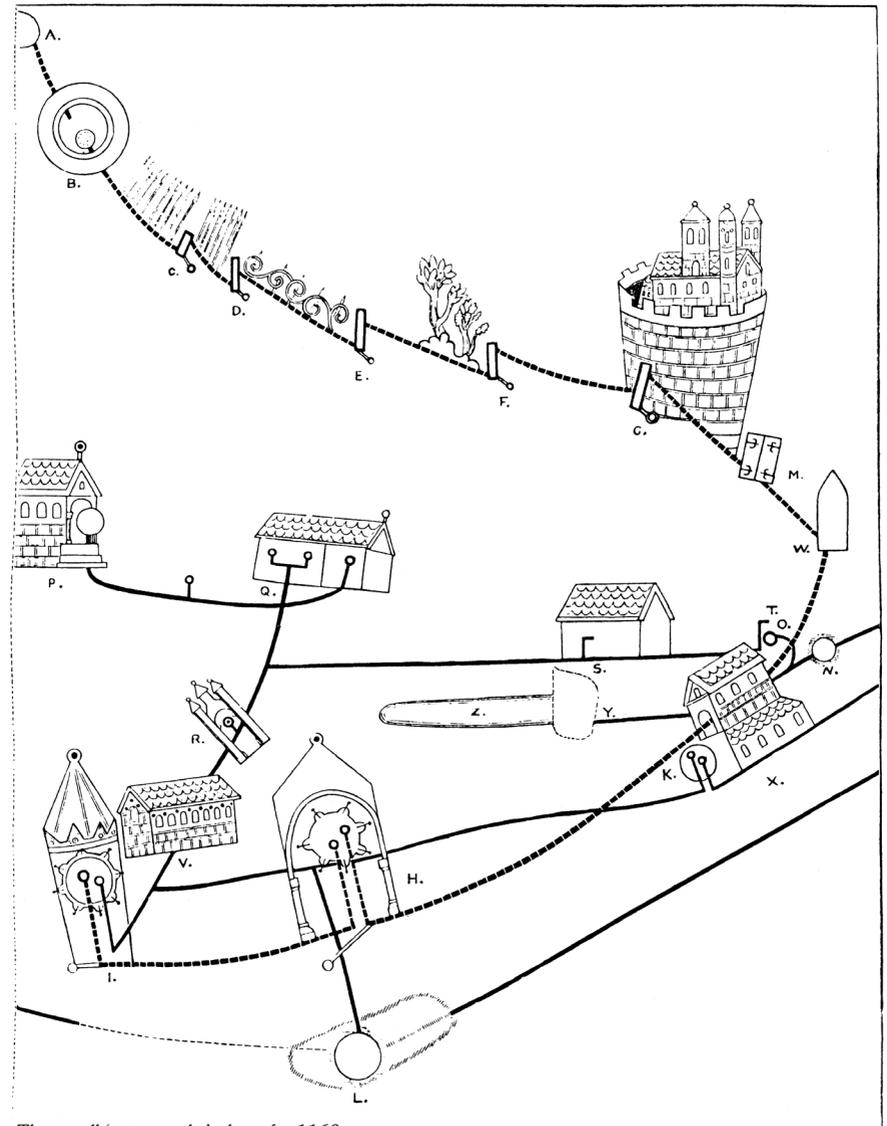
## The Augustinian Priory

William Somner in his *Antiquities of Canterbury* (1640) claimed that St Gregory's was the earliest house of regular canons in Britain. The Augustinian order of regular canons was, however, not known in England until a couple of decades after Lanfranc refounded St Gregory's, so it is unlikely that St Gregory's became an Augustinian priory until early in the twelfth century. At this time many other ancient 'colleges of clerks', like St Botolph's (Colchester), St Frideswide's (Oxford), or the former Cathedral of SS Peter and Paul, Dorchester were becoming houses of Augustinian canons. In 1123 William de Corbeil, the Prior of another Augustinian house, St Osyth's in Essex, became Archbishop of Canterbury, and it was probably soon after this that St Gregory's first properly became a house of Augustinian canons. This is also perhaps the time when St Gregory's first acquired a regular claustral layout of buildings, although an earlier date is also possible. The canons, known as 'Black Canons' wore a black habit with a white coat, and a linen rochet under a black cope with a scapular to cover their head and shoulders.

Some time in the early twelfth century a series of large masonry buildings were built around the cloister on the north side of the church. These were the Chapter House, Dorter, Frater, Kitchen and West Range. Little detailed documentation of these buildings has survived, though a will of 1516 gave 6s. 8d. to the repair of the Cloister.

Gervase of Canterbury tells us that on 2nd July 1145 St Gregory's church was burnt down. The Archbishop of the time, Theobald (1139–61), who had earlier been Abbot of Bec, seems to have been a special patron of the Priory, probably because he helped rebuild it after the fire. At this time, or perhaps earlier, St Gregory's Priory church was rebuilt with a large new double-aisled nave. When this new nave was built, the last remains of the two Anglo-Saxon churches were finally swept away. By the middle of the twelfth century, St Gregory's Priory and all its new claustral buildings had been built, and it is at this time that we have our first and only picture of the priory. It is shown as an apsidal-ended church with two western towers and a crossing tower on one of the famous 'waterworks' plans of c. 1160. Around the church was a high crenelated wall, and through the outer precinct (the priory's orchard) ran the Christ Church piped water supply. Christ Church's workmen were always allowed access to the pipe when

repairs were needed, and St Gregory's was to provide Christ Church with a basketful of fruit (no doubt from the orchard) annually in the second week in September for consumption in the Christ Church refectory.



The small 'waterworks' plan of c. 1160.

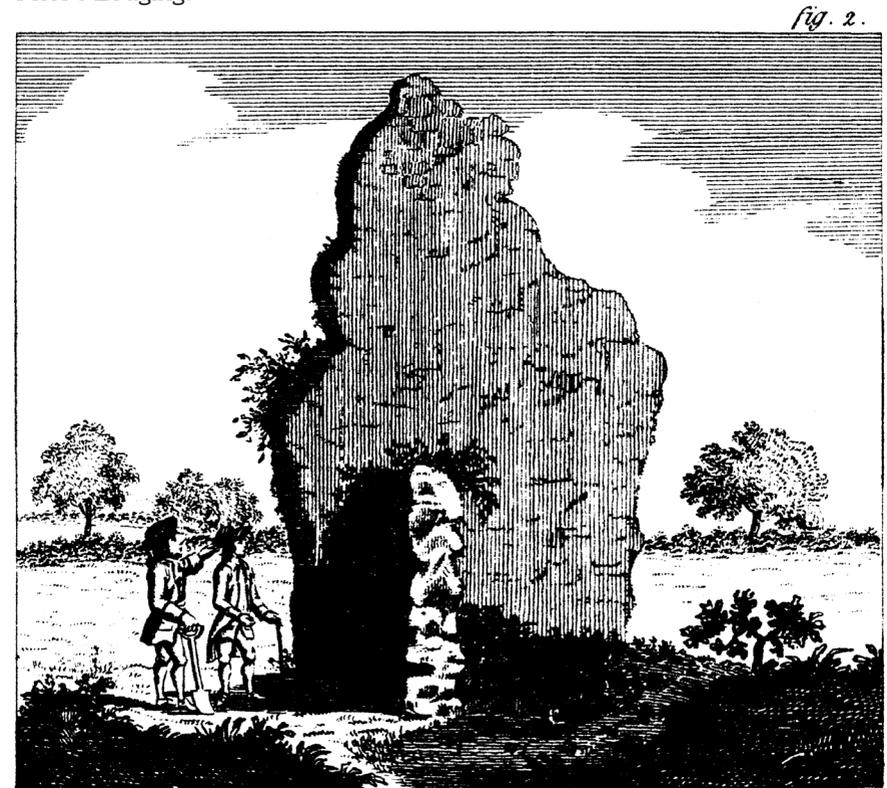
## Archdeacon's House

Close to the water-pipes and north-east of the main priory buildings was the official residence of the Archdeacon of Canterbury. The house, probably a complex of stone buildings, was within the priory precinct but had a separate entrance on the east from Ruttington Lane. The Archdeacon of Canterbury, who was always an exceptionally important church official, may have had a house here from Lanfranc's time, but it is only by the middle years of the twelfth century that we know he was resident here. In 1125, Archbishop William de Corbeil (1123–36), appointed Helewise, a fellow Augustinian canon, as Archdeacon in succession to a man called John, who had been made bishop of Rochester. Helewise was succeeded in 1139 by Walter, the brother of Archbishop Theobald, and then in 1148 Walter also became bishop of Rochester. Walter's successor was the infamous Roger of Pont l'Eveque, the great enemy of Thomas Becket, who became Archbishop of York in 1154 after being Archdeacon of Canterbury for six years. The next Archdeacon was, of course, Thomas Becket himself (he was also to be Chancellor of England at the same time), and he only resigned as Archdeacon in 1163, six months after being consecrated Archbishop. More important royal and archiepiscopal clerks followed Becket as Archdeacon until Simon Langton, the brother of the Archbishop, was appointed in 1227. He decided to move the official residence to St Stephen's, Hackington, and Archbishop Stephen Langton (1207–28) then gave the Archdeacon's house and garden to the canons, 'provided they maintain in its original state the chapel said to have been built by Thomas Becket'. This was probably a domestic chapel in origin, but after Becket's canonization in 1173, it no doubt soon became a shrine. In 1462 there is a record of it being used by a citizen's guild (The Brotherhood of St Thomas the Martyr standing in the garden of St Gregory's). Remarkably the shell of this chapel survived until the late eighteenth century and was depicted by William Stukely in 1722 and S. Hooper in 1787.



## Archbishop's Treasury and Archives

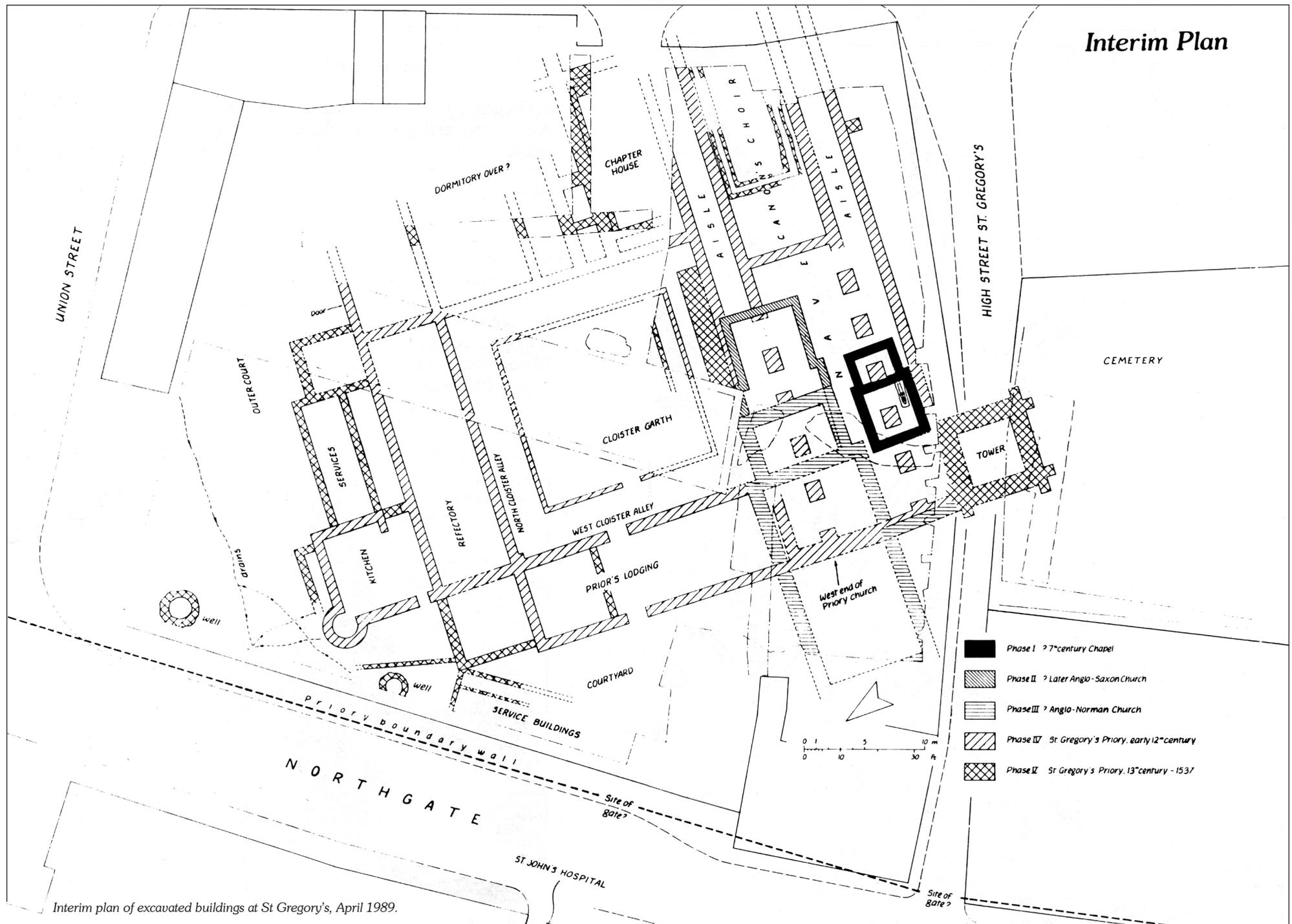
St Gregory's Priory always had a close connection with their patron, the Archbishop, and this was reflected by the keeping of the Archbishop's treasury and archives at St Gregory's from at least the later thirteenth century, and probably from a much earlier date. It seems probable that the priory was the centre for all important diocesan records (Archbishop's and Archdeacon's) by the end of the twelfth century. The Archbishop also housed some important visitors at St Gregory's, and in the late medieval period we have a record of some sessions of the consistory court being held there (from 1468 to 1474 we know that afternoon sessions at St Gregory's dealt with probate business, after instance cases had been heard at the cathedral in the mornings). Some of the Archbishop's archives appear to have remained at St Gregory's even after the Dissolution, when the ecclesiastical lawyer, Sir John Boys, lived there in the old Prior's Lodging.



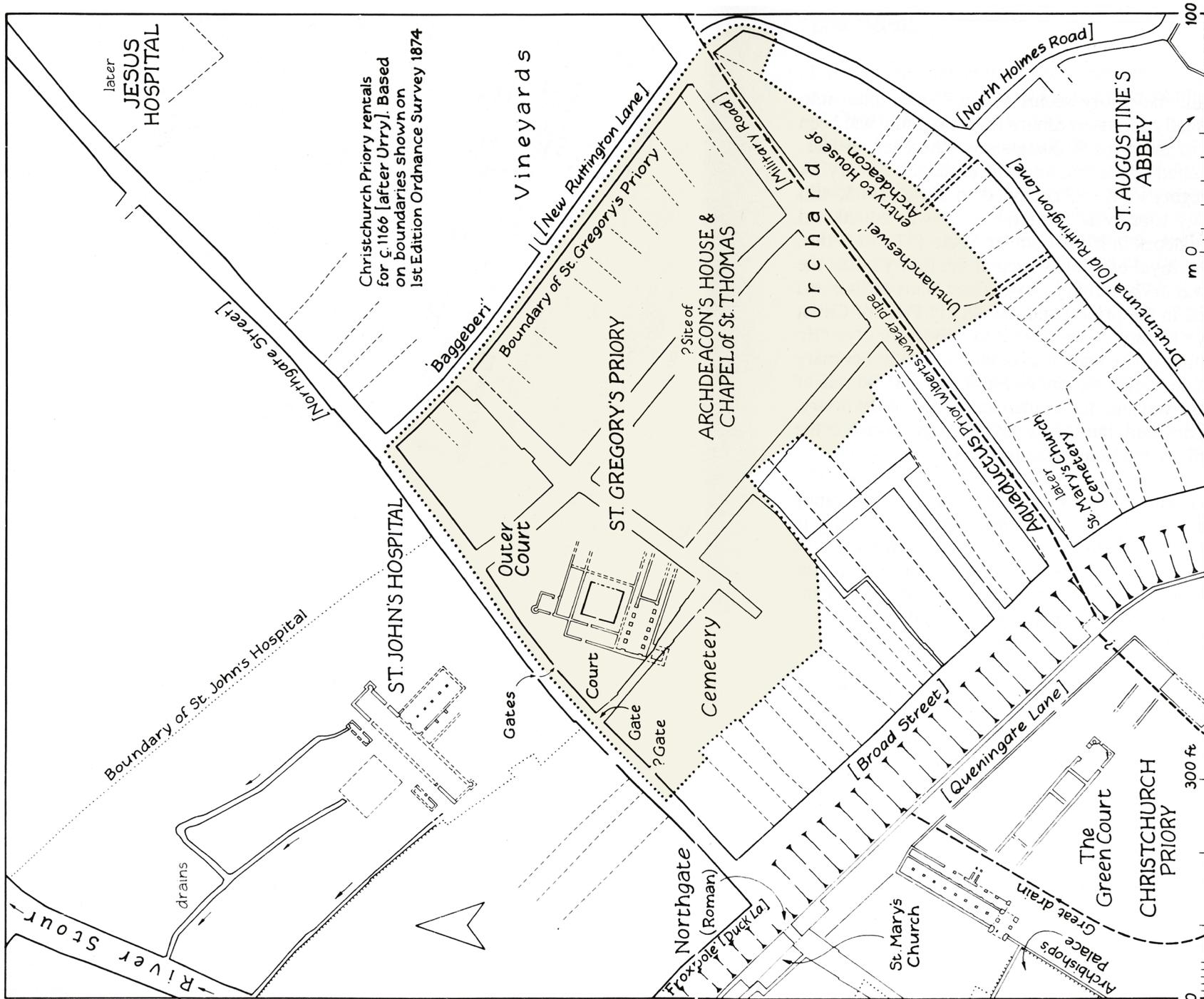
*F. Perry del.*

Late eighteenth-century engraving of the Chapel of St Thomas.

# Interim Plan



Interim plan of excavated buildings at St Gregory's, April 1989.



The Northgate area in the mid twelfth century.

## Later History

In the later Middle Ages, the priory seems to have sunk more into obscurity. There were usually about ten canons (the maximum had been thirteen) and almost all of the priory's possessions (churches, estates, tithes, etc.) had been acquired by the middle of the thirteenth century. A fine cartulary of St Gregory's Priory, compiled in about 1265, still survives in the University Library at Cambridge. It was edited and published by Audrey Woodcock in 1956 (Camden Society, Third Series, vol. 86). In 1329 several royal officials stayed at the priory when the young King Edward 111 was in Canterbury. A year later many defects and disturbances are recorded in the priory, and the elderly Prior of Christ Church, the great Henry of Eastry, was ordered to correct matters. He ordered the removal of three of the canons to other houses. In February 1368 Archbishop Langham visited the priory and found that the rule of silence was not being observed and that women had access to the priory. He ordered these to be corrected, but things obviously got worse in the fifteenth century, as in many religious establishments.

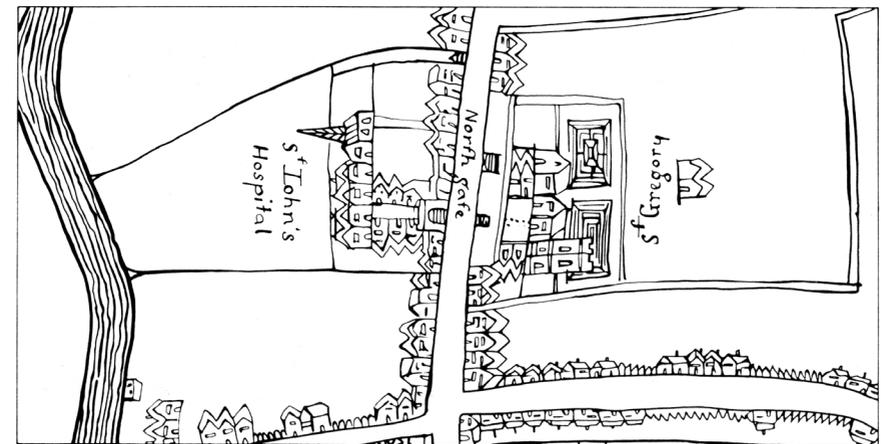
Some very late medieval wills give us some clues about the topography of the church in its final state. In 1478, Geoffrey Holman of Northgate parish was buried in the church 'before the window of St Martin on the north side of the church', while Henry Trewonwall, registrar of the consistory of Canterbury, was buried 'in the nave of the church before the high cross' in 1483. In 1464 five marks was given 'towards the building of the bell-tower there', while in 1487 10s. was given 'to the making of the new steeple there'. Another will of 1495 of Alice Consaunt ordered her to be buried 'in the belfry of St Gregory's beside the sepulture of her late husband'. This must be the tower on the south-west side of the nave and suggests it was built (or rebuilt) in the second half of the fifteenth century. Burials in 1472 and 1500 were to be 'in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, within the church of this priory', while another will of 1496 refers to 'the netheryard of Our Lady Chapel in the church of St Gregory'. Many other burials in the churchyard are recorded at this time, and there is no doubt that it acted as the cemetery for the church of St Mary upon the Northgate as well as for the Hospital of St John the Baptist.



## Last Decades

Early in the sixteenth century there is a contemporary account of an extraordinary story of how a man called William Fisher and two servants of Christ Church went to play dice with one of the canons, a man called Master Brabourne (he may be the same man who became prior in 1528). They were let in by the back gate in Ruttington Lane, and then played there all night in a nearby room, winning quite a lot of money from the canon. A visitation by Archbishop Warham in 1511 also shows that the priory was in a sorry state. At this time there was the prior, sub-prior, sacrist, precentor (who was accused of often quarrelling with the brethren) and six other canons (including a student at Cambridge). There were also complaints that the butler gave the canons very bad beer, that the precentor did not know how to sing, and that there was no bell-ringer, so that the brethren did not know the time of divine service. The prior at this time was Dr Thomas Welles, one of the Archbishop's chaplains, who was often absent. He appears also to have held several rectories and vicarages and was made Bishop of Sidon in 1515. When he died in 1526, it is recorded that he was buried in the priory church next to his predecessor, Edward Guildford.

At about the same time an agreement was reached with the City concerning new houses, which had 'been built next adjoining into the said monastery, as well on and by the south part of the said church gate, as on and by the north pail of the court gate of the said church'. These houses, which were on the Northgate frontage, were to be within the jurisdiction of the City. They are clearly shown on the map of Canterbury made in c. 1640.



Detail from the map of Canterbury for c1640.

## The End of the Priory

In 1535, the Valor Ecclesiasticus records that the priory and its possessions were worth £166 4s 5½d per annum. At this time there were a prior and six canons, and two years later the house had been dissolved with the prior, John Symkins, receiving a pension of 20 marks per annum. A few years later Symkins became a canon of the new foundation at Rochester, but was deprived of his prebend in 1553 for being married. St Gregory's first became crown property, but only a short time later it was exchanged for the site of the recently dissolved abbey of St Radegund (near Dover), and became in 1537 the property once again of the Archbishop. He, in turn, let it on long leases, and all the old possessions of the priory (except the manor of Howfield) remained part of the St Gregory's estate. Soon after this, all the old priory buildings except the prior's house and bell-tower were demolished, and most of the stone would have been carted out for use elsewhere.



## St Gregory's: a private house

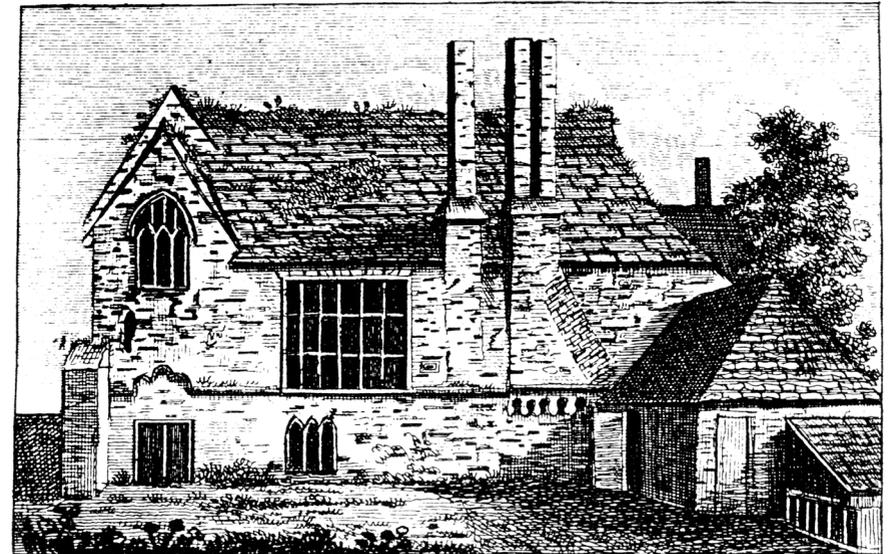
The first tenant of the prior's house from the Archbishop was a lawyer called Richard Neville of South Leverton in Nottinghamshire, and here was born in about 1543 his son, Thomas, who was to become a leading academic at Cambridge and a chaplain to Queen Elizabeth I. In 1593 Thomas Neville became Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and four years later he was made Dean of Canterbury. He continued to hold both positions until his death at Cambridge on 2nd May 1615. Most of his energies were devoted to his Cambridge work (he gave the College many Canterbury books and spent over £3,000 on rebuilding 'Neville's Court' at Trinity), but he also rebuilt the Brenchley chantry on the south side of the Cathedral nave in Canterbury (at the Cathedral's expense) as a burial place for his family (his father, mother, uncle and brother, as well as himself). The Dean's elder brother, Alexander continued as tenant at St Gregory's after his father's death in 1552, and acted as Archbishop Parker's researcher for various learned books he was writing. It seems that much of the Archbishop's archive remained at St Gregory's at this time.

## Post-Dissolution Graveyard

After the Dissolution, burial within the graveyard seems to have continued, and in 1560 a case was brought against the tenant because he 'withheld part of the churchyard'. A visitation of 1573 tells us that there was a complaint that the churchyard was 'not decently kept, neither can they bury in it unless they pay 2d for an old body and 1d for a child'. The late sixteenth-century tenant, Sir John Boys, finally resolved this by obtaining permission to 'appropriate and inclose' it. In return he provided a new churchyard further to the east, a churchyard that is now (February 1989) having its south-west corner disturbed by the new widened and rebuilt Military Road.

## Sir John Boys House

Sir John Boys, who styled himself 'of St Gregory's' was an ecclesiastical lawyer who had made a fortune out of his profession. He came to St Gregory's in the 1580s (his family were from Fredville in Nonington), and was the first Recorder of Canterbury, a judge of the chancery court for the Cinque Ports, and high steward (and legal advisor) to five successive Archbishops. He was also briefly Member of Parliament for Canterbury and was knighted in 1603.



Late eighteenth-century engraving of the Prior's Lodging.

In the late 1590s, he founded a new hospital for the poor, Jesus Hospital, just up the road from St Gregory's. He died in 1612 and was buried at the east end of the north aisle of the cathedral nave. His splendid monument (with a reclining effigy on it) can still be seen there. In his will he devised the lease to his widow and afterwards his nephew, Thomas Boys (died 1625). A survey made in 1616-7 (now in Lambeth Palace Library, TC2), shows what a magnificent house and garden it had become, no doubt with the help of Sir John Boys' money. The survey describes the property as:

*Fair-built house, Hall, Parlour, Great dining chambers, offices [i.e. kitchen, etc]. Garden on the east side of the house with walks and mounts, walled about, and a summer house or long gallery on the northern part of the garden. An orchard well-planted with fruit trees and two fishponds in it, the orchard adjoining the garden towards the south and is further south than the premises and the land hereafter mentioned [this must be the old churchyard]*

*One old dovehouse adjoining of the woodyard towards east. One parcel of meadow ground (where the dovehouse stands) east and north of the premises.*

A fine map of Canterbury, drawn in about 1640 (Cathedral Library Map 123), confirms this and shows two areas of formal gardens to the east of the main buildings. The map also shows two main buildings, and the belltower to the south, and two smaller ranges to the north and south of the front courtyard. Larger and smaller gateways are shown in the high wall fronting onto Northgate street.

In 1623 a branch of the Hales family took over the lease, and they passed it on to the Honeywoods, and they to the Wootons. A succession of Archbishop's tenants then continued after the Restoration in 1660 till Philip Donner Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, died possessed of the lease in 1773. The following year the whole estate was sold by the Archbishop to George Gipps, the Member of Parliament for Canterbury. When he died in February 1800 the whole of the medieval estate of St Gregory's was remarkably almost intact.



Engraving of the Prior's Lodging made shortly before demolition in 1848.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the second edition of Hasted records that:

*'there are the remains of several noble and lofty apartments in it'; but the whole has been ruined for a number of years past, and only the bare walls left, without a window frame or pane of glass to keep out the weather. It is now made use of as a potter's workshop, and for store-rooms for his manufactory'.*

Shortly afterwards a clay pipe kiln appears to have been made behind the house, and the site of this has been excavated on the west side of the cloister range. The area around appears to have been used mainly for market gardens.

## The Ville of St Gregory

The area of the priory precinct, called 'the ville of St Gregory', was until the late nineteenth century not part of the County borough of Canterbury, but a detached portion of Kent. Earlier it was considered to be under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop's great manor and hundred of Westgate. The exact boundaries to this precinct, which must originally have been marked by a stone wall, are accurately shown on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey (1:500) sheets of 1874. Over the last eight centuries there have been many disputes concerning the legal status of this precinct and the cemetery within it.

## St Gregory's Barracks

During the Napoleonic Wars, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a major new road, still called Military Road, was driven across the eastern part of the precinct (along the line of the twelfth-century water pipe) to connect up with new Infantry, Artillery and Cavalry Barracks. A host of smaller streets were then laid out across the rest of the St Gregory's site and a mass of new houses were erected on the open ground. Many of these houses were in turn swept away after the last war, but the streets (Union Street, Union Place, Victoria Row and Artillery Street) remain.

The Prior's Lodging at the core of the site was now hemmed in on all sides, and in 1848 it too was eventually demolished. A final picture of the building from the north-west made a short time before its demolition, was published in *The Illustrated London News*. It shows the late medieval doorway and large hall window of the Prior's Lodging (and the bell-tower in the background), and can be compared with the view of the back of the building (engraved in 1787) of about sixty years earlier. This later eighteenth-century view, taken from the east, shows the roof line for the back wall of the cloister west walk with above it the large, probably Elizabethan, hall window. To the south is a gable containing a perpendicular window which may originally have lighted the Prior's chamber or chapel. Below it, in the cloister wall, is a trefoil decoration which may have been above a thirteenth-century parlour passage entrance.

With the destruction of the Prior's house, virtually all traces of St Gregory's above ground were destroyed. Much renewed robbing of walls below ground also appears to have taken place at this time, and by the middle of the nineteenth



Opposite: Detail from the 1st edition Ordnance Survey for 1874, showing the St Gregory's area.

century the whole area had been built over yet again. Just over a century later a new G.P.O. sorting office was erected in 1958 on the site, and it is a very great tragedy that no archaeological excavation was carried out in advance of this work. Equally, much of the rest of the St Gregory's precinct was covered by new houses and blocks of flats in 1960-1, including the probable site of the Archdeacon's house, and the eastern part of the churchyard. The present excavations show clearly the immensely destructive concrete foundations that were put in thirty years ago. These have cut large swathes out of 'the earlier stratigraphy. The present excavations, funded by Townscape Homes, are therefore a final and unique opportunity to 'preserve by record' all that survives of St Gregory's below ground before it is removed mechanically for the new underground car park.

*Tim Tatton-Brown for the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, March 1989.*

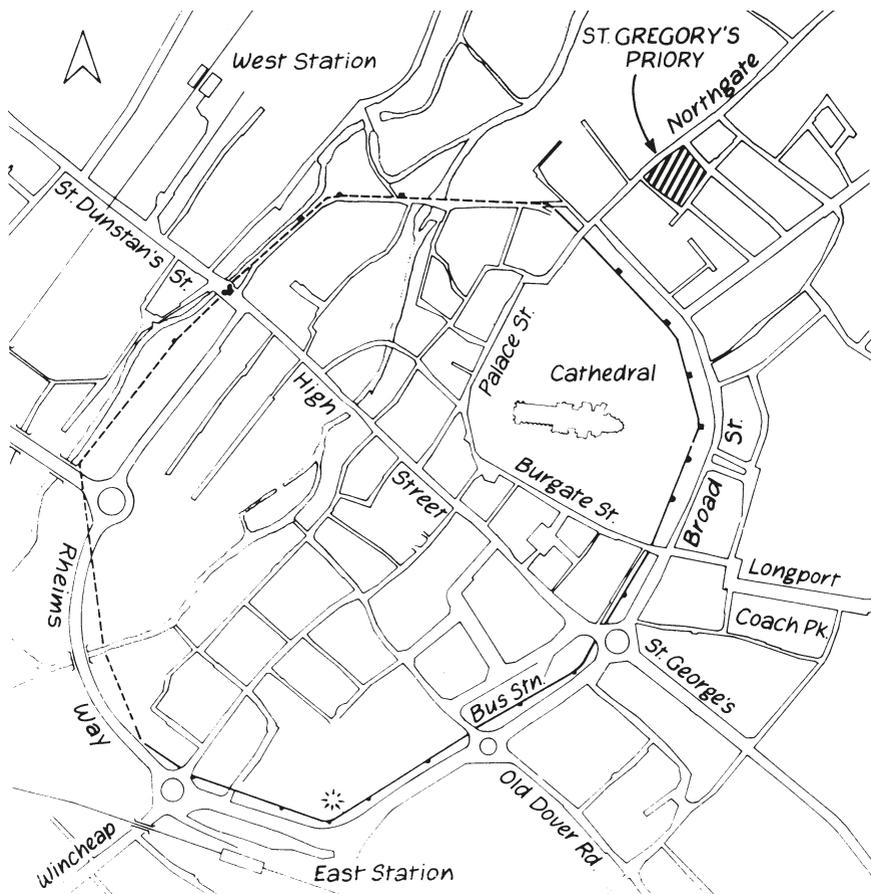


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