

Barking - The Town and The Abbey

Excavations at Abbey Retail Park, Abbey Road, Barking



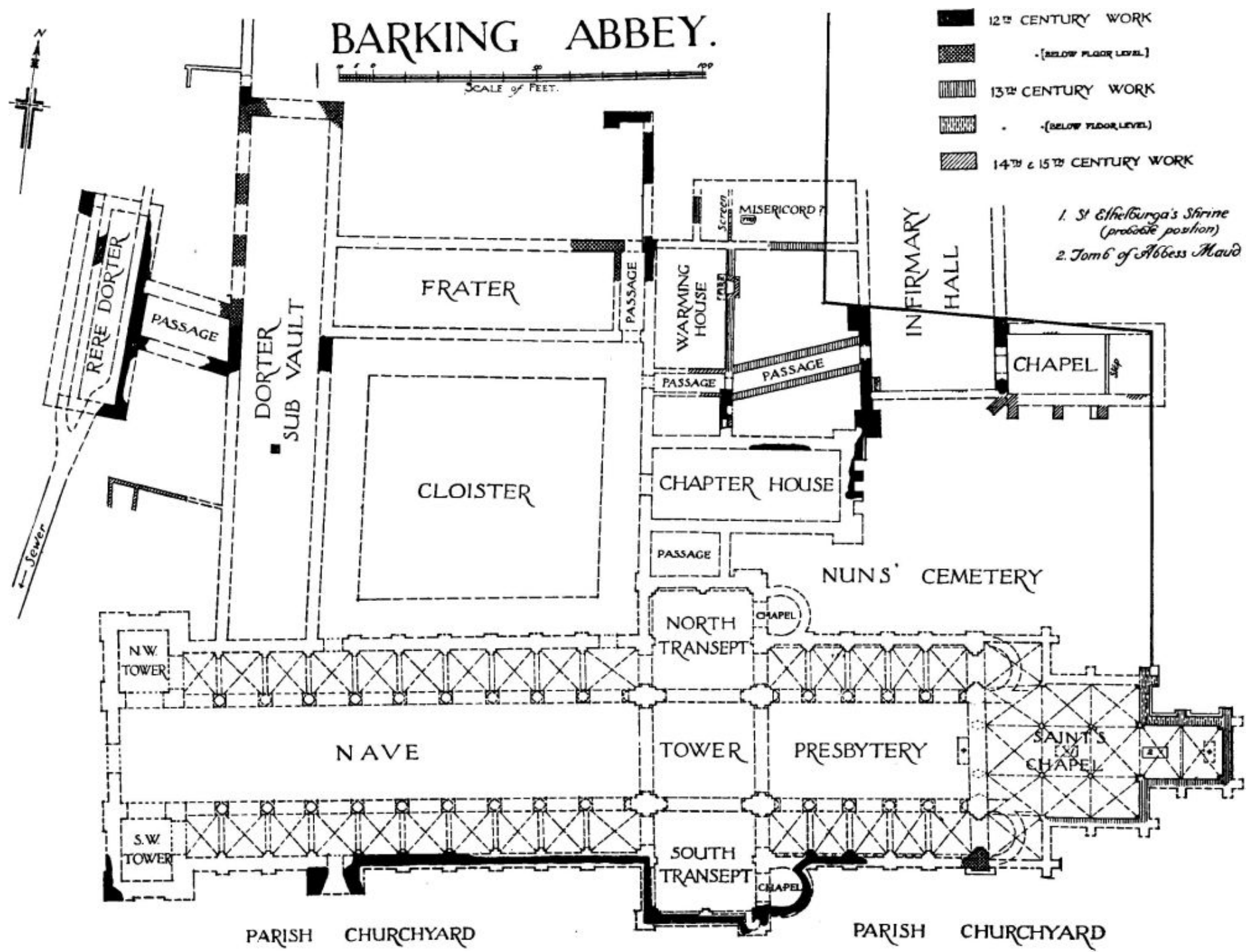
Barking - The Town

Historically, Barking, now in London, was the largest parish in Essex. The name means ‘the settlement of Berica’s people’, and first comes to light in the late 7th century when Erkenwald, soon to be Bishop of London, founded the Abbey. By the time of Domesday Book in 1086, a town had grown up around the Abbey and had become a flourishing fishing port, one of the largest in Essex, with a population of 250 households. It grew to 461 houses in 1670 and 752 houses by 1796. The 1801 census lists a total population of 3,906, and by 1891 this had exploded to 14,301 inhabitants.

Notable people associated with Barking include the explorer Captain James Cook (married at St Margaret’s, Barking, 21st December, 1762), the philosopher James Bentham (lived here as a boy) and the philanthropist Dr Thomas Barnardo, one of whose largest homes for children was founded in Barking.

The Abbey

Saint Erkenwald founded Chertsey Abbey in AD 666 and Barking Abbey (on behalf of his sister Ethelburga) probably at around the same time, or at least before AD 675 when he became Bishop of London. The Venerable Bede wrote about the abbey in his Ecclesiastical History of the English People but this tells us only that the convent was built in a restricted space and that the nuns’ graveyard lay to the west. The original church was dedicated to St Mary and from the start the Abbey housed both nuns and monks, which was not unusual in late Saxon England. An Abbess was in charge of the whole community: Ethelburga herself was the first Abbess.



Plan of the medieval Barking Abbey showing the different phases of construction (British History Online)



Part of Champan and Andre's 1774 map of Essex.



The Curfew Tower as it stands today.

There is a story of the Abbey having been burnt by Viking raiders in the 870s, but this may be a later invention. What is more certain is that the abbey was re-founded by King Edgar in around 990, this time for nuns only. It is not clear why it needed re-founding, if it had been laid waste by the Vikings, can it have remained empty for over a century? Possibly this was more of a political gesture of support than a response to any such dramatic decline. Whatever had happened to it in the 9th and 10th centuries, the newly refounded convent became one of England’s largest and richest Benedictine houses and its Abbess traditionally took precedence over all others. Otherwise, little is known of the Saxon Abbey, that is before the Norman Conquest.

William the Conqueror confirmed the Abbey’s possessions, and it was while staying here that he received the submission of the East Saxon and Northumbrian nobles. The whole building complex appears to have been extensively rebuilt in the 12th century, possibly on a different site from the original but probably within the same precinct. The Church was extensively remodelled in the 13th century and apparently re-dedicated, probably to St Mary jointly with St Ethelburga, who by now was one of several saints drawn from the ranks of the abbesses, whose relics the church held. Despite its wealth, it appears that by 1319 the Abbey was again in disrepair, as the Abbess was authorized to fell 300 oaks in Hainault for the repair of the Church and other buildings which were ‘in ruins’. A second church, dedicated to St Margaret, was built within the abbey grounds, south of the main abbey church, probably well before 1300 when it became the parish church, and still survives.

The Abbey remained one of the wealthiest religious establishments in England until 1539 when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries (and nunneries). At this point, besides the Abbess, there were only 30 nuns left, despite the Abbey’s annual income of £862, 12s 5½d. Barking Abbey’s buildings began to be demolished in 1541, although this process seems to have taken almost 100 years - indeed some of the boundary walls survived until the 19th century and the Curfew Tower of about 1460 still stands.