A short history of Burnham Norton Friary

The Friary site lies on the edge of the parish of Burnham Norton between the River Burn and the road to Burnham Market. Before the marshes were drained, high tide would bring the sea up to the wall on the eastern boundary and could cause flooding, so the friary was built on the higher ground to the west.

The original ‘Carmelites’ were hermits who left Mount Carmel, Palestine, in the early 1240s to start a new life in Europe. Burnham Norton was the fourth Carmelite house in England, and the first in Norfolk, founded by Sir William Calthorp and Sir Ralph Hemenhall. A small group first settled in the north of Burnham Norton parish, before moving to the current site in 1253.

The hermits soon became friars. Unlike hermits, friars went out into the community where they could beg from people in return for prayers and sermons, often attracting large crowds. They cared for the poor and the unwell, particularly during the Black Death (mid-14th century), which also struck down many of the friars.

From the end of the 12th century, the various orders of friars won more and more support from medieval people, who were impressed by their commitment to genuine poverty and to preaching. Because friars depended not on revenue from lands but from charitable donations they preferred to settle in towns and cities, and most of Norfolk’s friaries were in Norwich, King’s Lynn, Yarmouth and Thetford. Three were in smaller settlements, however — at Walsingham, at Blakeney and at Burnham Norton. Carmelite friars were often described as Whitefriars because of their white cloaks or ‘habits’.

The Friary at Burnham Norton stood by an old road (now gone) to Walsingham, where it crossed the river Burn. In medieval times the shrine at Walsingham was one of the most popular destinations for Christian pilgrims in England. At the friary they could stop for a rest on their journey, drink from the Holy Well, and worship in the church, in return for donations and gifts to the friars which helped them to continue living there.

**The Walsingham Conspiracy**

In 1536, during the dissolution of the monasteries, a group of men from the local area were arrested, including two friars from Burnham Norton: John Peacock and William Gybson. The men had been heard to say they didn’t approve of monasteries being closed down. They were accused of plotting an uprising against King Henry VIII - the so-called Walsingham Conspiracy - and were convicted of treason. William was lucky enough to be pardoned but John was hanged, drawn and quartered as a traitor in King’s Lynn on 1 June 1537.

**The end of the friary**

At the Dissolution of the monasteries Thomas Cromwell received a letter from Jane Calthorp in 1538 asking him to petition the king to allow her to purchase the buildings when there were then only four friars remaining. They were apparently too poor to maintain the property and were happy to sell up. However, the king gave the monastery to Sir Richard Gresham and the friary was closed.
One of the buildings was converted to a house - now Friary Cottage next door. The church became a barn and the gatehouse became part of the farm. Much stone was taken away and re-used in local buildings.

During the First World War the field was used as a temporary prisoner of war camp. German prisoners were given specially-made tokens that were used instead of money in local shops. This prevented them from using money to escape.

**Site layout**

Today, the 14th-century gatehouse and west gable of the church survive above ground, plus a fragment of a building which forms part of Friary Cottage next door.

Earthworks and geophysical surveys suggest that the cloister - the main living area of the friars - was to the north of the church, with only a few buildings to the south.

The earthworks immediately behind the free-standing west wall are assumed to indicate the site of the church although its later use as a barn makes the earthworks difficult to interpret - the building appears to have been subdivided into six compartments but the purpose of these is not yet fully understood.

To the north of the meadow is a private house, Friary Cottage, which has much dressed stonework in it. Much of this is re-used; however, the north-east corner of the house and its adjoining buttress are original and once formed part of the Friary complex.

**Standing remains**

The architectural features of the gatehouse suggest a date of about 1320, with the flint flushwork being some of the earliest in this area. An 18th-century etching depicts the ruined gatehouse, and what appears to be the church building re-used as a barn behind it. A 19th-century engraving, contemporary with the restoration of the gatehouse, shows the original tracery in the main window in full detail but this was later lost. The gatehouse was re-roofed in the 1920s. The tracery in the window today is modern, based on the earlier etching but dating from a further restoration by Norfolk County Council in 1996 when it was repaired using brick mullions. Below the window is a richly moulded recess with bases for three missing statues.

The metal spiral staircase was added in 1996 and replaced the original stone spiral staircase, traces of which were found in excavations before the new staircase was erected.

The west wall of the church behind the gatehouse has a central doorway, niches for statues to either side and a blocked window above. The wall was built up with later materials to form a gable, long after it ceased to be a church.

At the end of the meadow are the standing remains of the precinct wall which in the medieval period stood between the Friary and the tidal estuary of the River Burn. On the north boundary by the wood are the fallen remains of this part of the precinct wall. The southern boundary probably followed the line of the existing hedge.

**Excavations and research**

Only small areas of the site have been excavated, associated with works to install the spiral staircase and to repair part of the precinct wall in the north-east corner.

In March of 2017, geophysical survey (magnetometry) within the precinct of St Mary’s Friary, Burnham Norton, revealed further evidence for the sub-surface survival of masonry remains representing a range of buildings to the south of the friary church. The remains of a N-S aligned wall detected to the south of the gatehouse may represent the eastern extent of a further range of buildings running parallel to Friar’s Lane.

Due east of the friary church and aligned with it, the remains of a rectangular building were detected, associated with a possible trackway or thoroughfare aligning with the friary church and a...
possible gate in the extant eastern portion of the precinct wall. To the south, surviving sub-surface remnants of a masonry wall were detected atop an earthwork bank, running E-W for 73 m with a possible origin at the south-eastern corner of the site. It is not clear whether this represents the southern portion of an enclosing precinct wall or some form of internal division. Faint traces of a parallel internal division 30 m to the north was also detected.

Norfolk Archaeological Trust management
The site is managed by the Trust under a lease agreement with the Holkham Estate.
Further reading

Online:
Imagined Land: St Mary’s Friary, Burnham Norton. Geophysical Survey Author: David Bescoby MCIfA 14th April 2017 https://sites.google.com/site/burnhamnortonimaginedland/burnham-norton-research

Other reading:
A full architectural description of the gatehouse and west wall of the church can be found in:

Location:
Burnham Norton Friary, Friar’s Lane, King’s Lynn, PE31 8JA