



North Elmham, Norfolk  
Elmenham

Grid ref ..... TF 987 217

Foundations of Cathedral

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Foundations only. Complete church, W axial tower with S turret-stair; nave flanked by two small towers. Transepts Small, apsidal chancel. Period C2, possibly rebuilt on ruins dating from period A2.

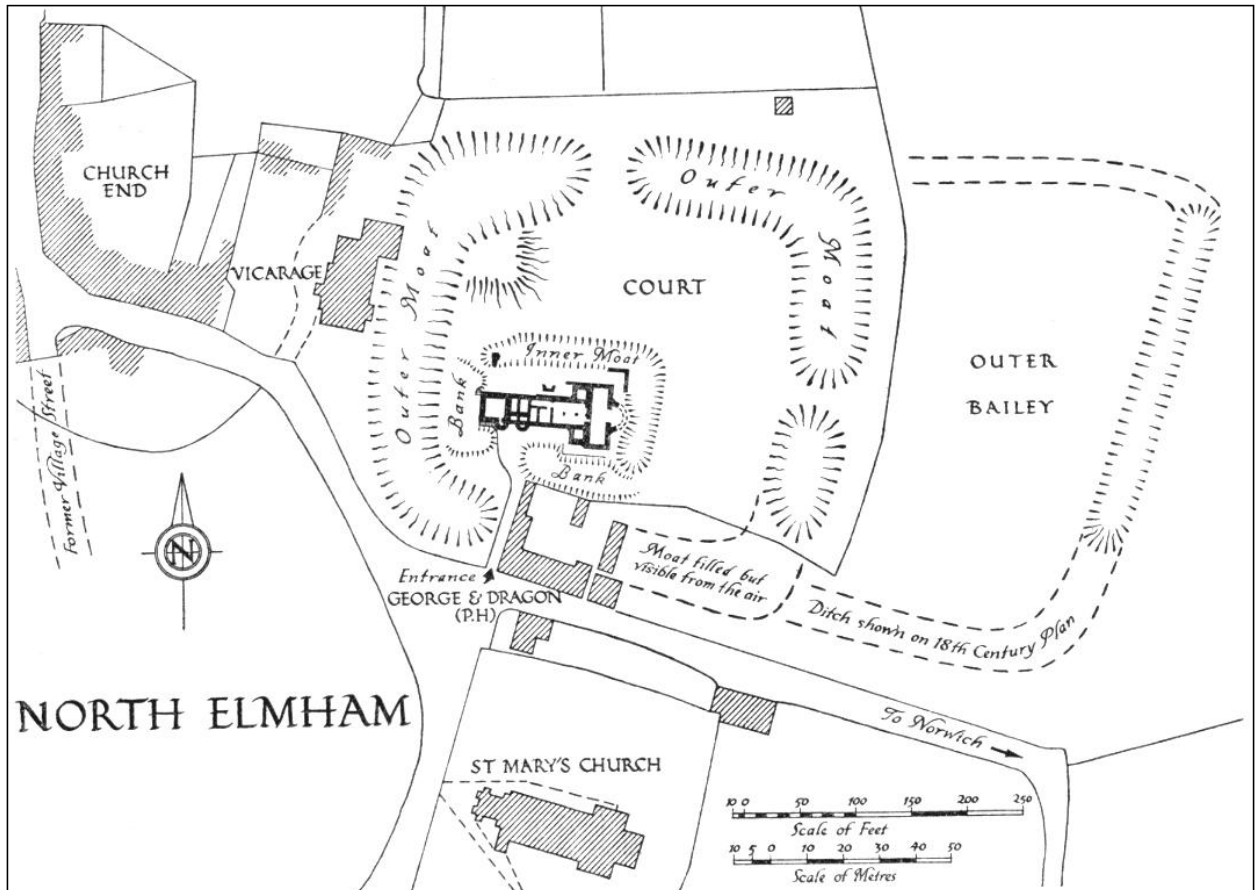
Taylor

Also see *Current Archaeology* No 36 pp 22-28 and No 19 pp 226-231.

In AD 673, Archbishop Theodore divided the see of Dunwich and established a new Bishopric at Elmham. Modern opinion is almost entirely in favour of N Elmham as the seat of this new Bishopric, but some writers (particularly H. Harrod, 1874; J. J. Raven, 1898; F. S. Stevenson, 1926) have suggested S ELMHAM (q.v.) where there is also an Old Minster. The see was transferred to Thetford AD1075 and to Norwich AD1094 after which Elmham was neglected.

Building has some early features (e.g. Tau plan) and some late features (construction) which make it difficult to estimate date. Original church was timber, not rebuilt in stone until C11. Floor of earlier building discovered below existing remains. Rigold's excavations indicate definitely three building periods.

- a Apse, transept, corner towers. Probably early C11 (perhaps 1020) to replace earlier timber square E end and chancel.
- b Later (perhaps 1050) timber nave rebuilt in stone and W tower with narrow W doorway and E arch erected.
- c Possibly shortly after Conquest of possibly as late as 1080, the blocking of the W doorway, insertion of N and S doorways at W end of nave and widening and reconstruction of tower arch. Possibly tower ashlar quoins inserted at this time.



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Church built in SW corner of large earthwork of about 300' square, surrounded by deep ditch, spoil from which spread over "island" to form nearly level plot raised by 5'.

The church was made into a manor house in late C14 by Bishop Hugh Despencer, who surrounded it with shallow ditch which destroyed part of the apse, and probably also made the outer ditch. The manor house ended at E crossing, and was occupied up to end C16 and then either demolished or allowed to decay. A few fragments of wall were standing in 1891. Vicar A. G. Legge excavated in 1871 but no positive results. The church was recognised as Anglo-Saxon by T. Butterick in 1903, who supplied drawing of site and remains, published by R. Howlett, 1913. Thorough but not complete excavation in 1925 (Clap.) and W. H. Godfrey. Later excavation by H.M. Ministry of Works under S. E. Rigold.

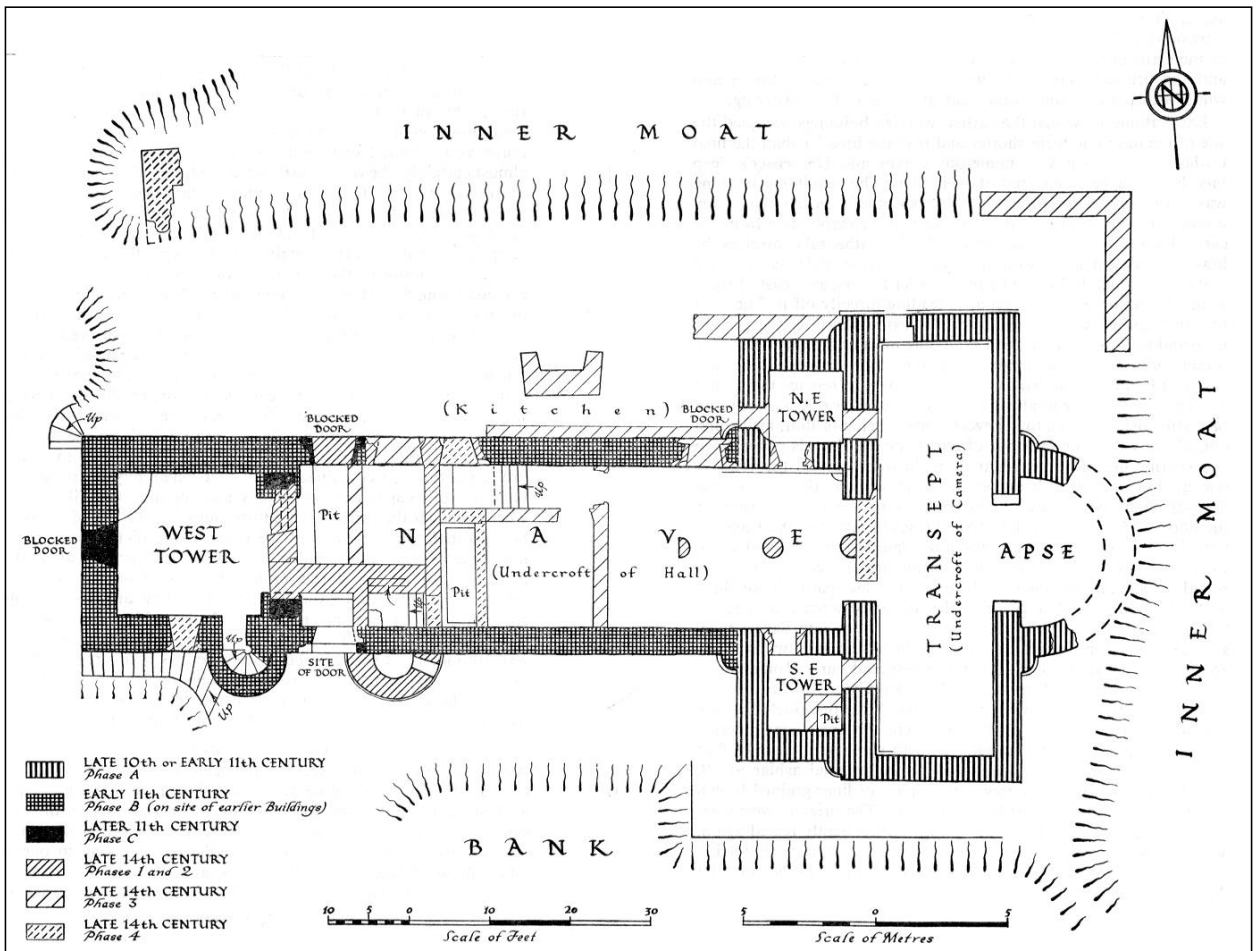
Construction and plan

Church consisted of aisleless nave, transepts of tau form, almost semi-circular apse, W axial tower and square flanking towers or stair-turrets in angles between transepts and nave. A small, semi-circular stair-turret projects from E end of tower S wall. Overall exterior length 132'. Exterior width across transepts 58'. Materials used were flint rubble and rubble of fairly large blocks of pudding stone of conglomerate, stained dark brown with iron. Parts of quoins of pudding stone, parts of oolitic limestone. In a few places masons attempted to use pudding stone as ashlar for facings.

Apse

Foundations large flint rubble in courses. Dimensions 18' wide x about 11' deep. Now foundations only, except sleeper wall across chord of apse and beginning of curved wall at N and S ends

On S, base of quarter-round angle pilaster remains.



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On N rather more wall remains with bases of two pilasters, one quarter-round angle pilaster, one half-round adjacent, about 1'10" diameter, only a bit of shaft remaining but shape established by remains of adjoining fragment of curved mortar-facing, containing mortar-face of bit of wall between pilasters, about 9".

Original pilasters possibly all round apse wall at 9" intervals, giving 15 pilasters, or possibly spaced in groups to allow of windows wider than 9".

### Transepts

Bases of walls of large flint rubble in courses. Above is course rubble of large blocks of pudding stone 3'6" thick. Surviving W jamb of N transept N doorway of oolitic limestone. Other quoins and dressings of pudding stone. Dimensions: exterior width across transepts 58'; interior 52' x 14' across.

E and W walls at ground level, N and most of W above ground (W wall formed E wall of Bishop's house).

N doorway in NW corner out straight through wall, without rebate, definitely late Anglo-Saxon feature. Base of W jamb remains. E jamb partly cut back

and rough rebate made, probably when house was built. Quarter-round pilasters in re-entrant angles between transepts and side towers. S pilaster plainly visible on whole remaining height of exterior wall. N pilaster buried in later C14 thickening of wall which runs along and beyond N wall of N tower. These quarter-round pilaster buttresses similar to some at BROUGHTON and elsewhere in Norfolk in angles between round tower and nave: possibly an East Anglian local peculiarity.

Underlying the flint course of W wall S arm is a curious dip with a rather abrupt termination, possibly indicating difference in date from pudding stone walling above.

Arch between transept and nave has only the foundations of two main responds remaining.

### Flanking towers

Bases of walls of large flint rubble in courses. Above this coursed rubble of fairly large blocks of pudding stone, about 4'3" thick. Quoins and dressings of pudding stone. Dimensions, each 8'6" square. Flanking towers and not merely stair-turrets is indicated by greater thickness of walls than those

*View from the East, photo by Jane Dunstall*



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of nave and transepts: may also have served as porticus. No special features.

Two doorways to nave reconstructed in late C14. Narrow doorways to transepts blocked, but visible. N tower had small doorway from W with no rebate. This doorway and that in N of N transept possibly suggest clergy entered from that side. N tower much altered: W face almost entirely rebuilt, possibly C14.

### Nave

Walls entirely of pudding stone, 3'6" thick, but N wall appears a little thinner than S wall.

Quoins of W splay of blocked N doorway of oolitic limestone. Other quoins and dressings of pudding stone. Dimensions, interior 72' x 20' (Clap and Godfrey. Rigold gives 65') Exterior width about 27'.

S wall largely intact up to about 8'. N wall much patched and altered. Towards W end is interior W jamb of doorway but no indication of it on exterior. Flint bench along N wall about 18" deep, probably late C14, built against Anglo-Saxon wall, probably as foundations of timber superstructure, perhaps

Bishop's kitchen. Quarter-round pilasters in re-entrant angles between turrets and nave: N pilaster destroyed almost to ground level.

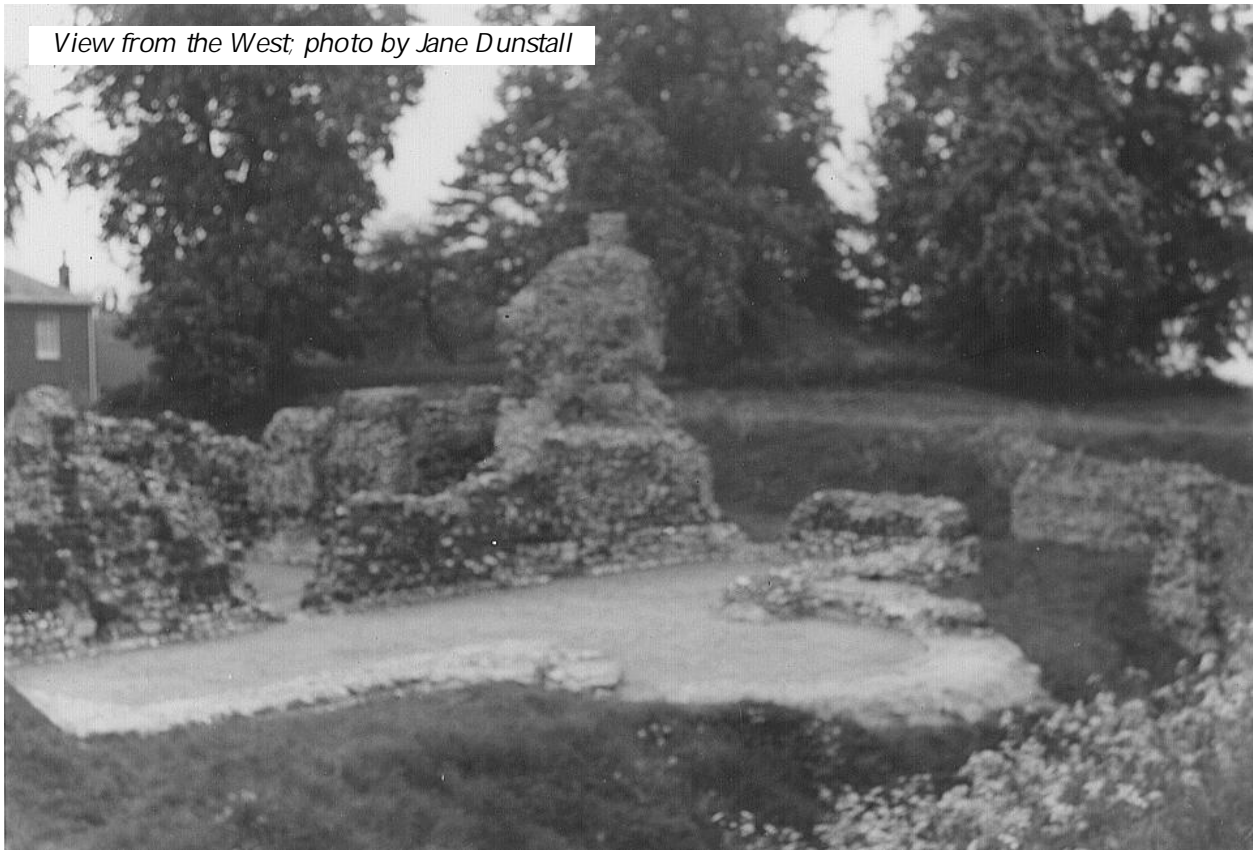
### W tower

Walls entirely of pudding stone, about 4'3" thick, but N wall appears to be a little thinner than S wall. Quoins and bases of responds of tower arch to nave where visible are of oolitic limestone. Other quoins and dressings of pudding stone. Dimensions, about 18'6" square internally (about 18" narrower than nave interior); exterior width about 27' (same as nave).

W face still buried in masses of earth. Wide arch, probably post-Conquest, between tower and nave. Base of N respond and one stone of S respond remaining. Rectangular base with plain-chamfered plinth. This arch succeeded earlier, narrower arch, base of which is visible beneath existing one.

Line of ashlar quoins of former doorway about 18" to E of line of arch in N wall. Moulded bases of engaged columns with sill of four flat stones between and straight joint on W, similar to doorway on S, remains; hidden by Bishop's half-

*View from the West; photo by Jane Dunstall*



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round tower. Probably of same date, probably post-Conquest, as widened tower E arch.

*EAF/MD*

### History

North Elmham, though then as now a remote village, was the see of the Bishops of East Anglia in the later Anglo-Saxon period. A church council in 1075 decreed that bishoprics should henceforth be in substantial towns, so Herfast, the first Norman Bishop of Elmham, moved his throne to Thetford, whence, in the 1090s, Bishop Herbert Losinga moved it again, to the new Cathedral Priory at Norwich. Elmham had originally been chosen for its central position and had become the nucleus of extensive episcopal estates. The cathedral stood, therefore, on the Bishop's private lands, contrary to the 'Hildebrandine' practice of the Normans, under which the cathedrals belonged to independent chapters. But the Manor of Elmham remained a possession of the Bishops, and for this reason a later bishop was able to convert the Cathedral, which had continued in use as a chapel on the estate, into a residence. Strangely enough, it is this sacrilegious misuse which has resulted in saving its remains for posterity.

The bishops also had a manor at South Elmham in Suffolk, where there stands a ruined building which has also been claimed as the Cathedral of Elmham. But the documentary evidence in favour of North Elmham, at any rate from the mid-C10 until the see was removed to Thetford, is quite conclusive.

A mediæval account of the foundations of Norwich Cathedral states that the Cathedral of Elmham was a wooden chapel, and so indeed it was for the greater part of its existence, but during the last generation or two of the Saxon period it was rebuilt in stone. Floors of the earlier timber buildings have been traced beneath the present ruins. It is not absolutely certain when this simple Cathedral was founded. St Felix, a Burgundian missionary, was invited over by Sigberct, King of the East Angles in the 630s, and established his bishopric in the Roman site of Dommoc (commonly said to be Dunwich, but more probably Walton Castle, near Felixstowe – certainly on the Suffolk coast). About fifty years later, when his third successor became infirm, two new bishops were appointed to share his work, and this arrangement continued. One remained at Dommoc and the other was doubtless intended to serve Norfolk. By the beginning of the

C9, at latest, he had established his bishopstool at Elmham but his work must still have been itinerant. At a council of 803 Ealhard Bishop of Elmham attended with several priests and deacons but not a single abbot. Nothing has been discovered at Elmham that can certainly be ascribed to this early period and it is even possible that the original church was on another site. Both bishoprics came to an end in the middle of the ninth century, owing to the disturbances and impoverishment caused by wars, first with the Mercians, who were then struggling to maintain their supremacy, and afterwards with the invading Danes. No trace, however, has been found of any violent destruction on the site of the Cathedral.

In 870 the Danes slew St Edmund, the last East Anglian king. Although within a generation he was locally revered as a Christian martyr, his realm remained without a bishop until it was recaptured by the West Saxons about 918. It then seems to have been put in charge of the Bishop of London, who founded a new subordinate cathedral at Hoxne in Suffolk. Towards the middle of C10 Bishop Theodred left legacies to both his cathedrals – London and Hoxne. Soon afterwards, about 955, East Anglia had a bishop of her own again – a single bishop, whose principal see was henceforward at Elmham. But he still retained his secondary cathedral at Hoxne, and continued to do so even after the move to Thetford. The bishops of the re-established see of Elmham included several worthy and charitable men, among whom Ælfric II (died 1083) left lands to support the small colleges of priests, whom later usage would call 'canons', at Elmham and at Hoxne, as well as to the new abbeys of St Edmund at Bury and St Benet at Hulme. It is perhaps to him that we owe the rebuilding of the church in stone. His successors were of worse stamp, corrupt and acquisitive, but not, for that reason, incapable of adorning the church. The final form of the building cannot be long before the Norman conquest.

When Bishop Herfast transferred his see to Thetford he disposed of part of the Elmham estate, but kept the principal manor, and after Herbert Losinga had founded a new church for the village, the cathedral became the manorial chapel and continued to be used as a burial place, its roof and the rendering of the walls being maintained in fair order. Judging from the pottery found, the early Norman bishops and their suites spent much of their time here, but during most of C12 and C13

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their successors visited it only rarely. Their hall, doubtless of timber, probably stood to the north of the former cathedral.

It was thus a rather neglected manor when Henry le Despenser, appointed Bishop of Norwich as quite a young man in 1370, as a reward for quasi-military service to the Pope, took a fancy to it, probably because of the good hunting it provided. He was an unedifying, swashbuckling prelate, who enjoyed himself quashing the local manifestations of the Peasants' Revolt, and further satisfied his warlike instincts by leading a savage raid on Flanders, which he called a 'crusade', because the French King supported a rival Pope. His unpopularity is attested in contemporary literature, and perhaps feeling ill-at-ease among his tenants, in 1388 he obtained a royal license to fortify his manor of North Elmham. Proably the outer moat and certainly the inner moat are his work. But his chief undertaking was to turn the Cathedral itself into a house – not a large one, a 'shooting box' rather than a castle. The ancient walls, half buried in his earthworks, served as an undercroft to the living-rooms he established above them. The bones of the Faithful Departed were irreverently disturbed in making his ditches and garderobe pits. No appropriator at the Dissolution of the Monasteries behaved more sacrilegiously than he. Quantities of deer-horns and pottery, some bearing his arms, and including gargantuan jugs, testify to Elmham's short reign of riot, in which he restlessly altered the building several times. After his death in 1406 no later bishop seems to have touched the place, as though it were accursed, and relics of a later age are negligible in quantity. But it is known that manorial courts continued to be held there. The Bishop was forced by Henry VIII to give up all his lands in exchange for the poorer possessions of the Abbot of Hulme. Elmham passed into the hands of the notorious Thomas Cromwell, but the 'Castle' site was assigned to the Vicarage.

In 1871 the Rev. A. G. Legge, then vicar of Elmham, did some excavation at the 'Castle Hills' and his discoveries were briefly published, but he did not realise their full significance, thinking the walls he had exposed were just Despenser's work. Not until 1903 did the amateur antiquary, T. Butterick, recognise and publish the fact that the remains are largely those of the Saxon Cathedral.

Subsequently the ruins became overgrown, but the then Vicar placed them in the guardianship of the Ministry of Works (now of Public Buildings and

Works) in 1948. They have since been cleared, consolidated and systematically excavated.

### Description

#### The Castle Earthworks

The visitor approaches the Cathedral ruins from the south and finds himself in a rectangular moated enclosure, fitting closely round the ruins. This in its turn occupies the south-west corner of a larger quadrangle, with a formidable moat, particularly impressive at the NW corner. Excavation has shown that the inner moat, and almost certainly, the outer moat too, are entirely Bishop Despenser's creation in the late C14. The inner moat cut off the tip of the apse of the Cathedral, though the outline of this has now been restored. On the south side the ditch has been filled up, but a steep inner bank of clay remains; on the west the clay bank still buries the exterior of the west tower of the church, and formerly it extended round part of the other sides. Despenser originally dug the moat with almost vertical sides, but, soon after, he partially back-filled it. The thin walling in the NE corner preserves the original steep profile at this point and acted as a retaining wall to a now destroyed section of the inner bank. The walling at the W end of the N moat is apparently some sort of sluice connected with the kitchen, which lay on that side of the converted cathedral.

The outer enclosure did not have a proper bank on the inner lip of the moat, the upthrow of which was spread all over to form a broad platform. It contained a well, but apparently no substantial buildings of Despenser's time – only stabling and such like. Somewhere beneath the thick, clay platform must be the site of the older bishop's hall. The upthrow of the deepest part of the moat, at the north-west forms an irregular mound, reminiscent of an earlier defensive 'motte' but if this or any other part of the earthwork reflects a pre-Despenser fortification, it is now disguised beyond recognition. There was a further outer bailey with a ditch, perhaps unfinished, to the E. The earthworks never carried a stone curtain-wall, although this was provided for in the license to 'crenellate' and gives the impression that the castle thus envisaged was never completed. The final heightening of the banks to the south and west of the cathedral dates from the last phase of Despenser's career.

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### The Cathedral

All the external walls, except a few patches, are remains of the Cathedral, and can easily be distinguished by their masonry – large, well-coursed lumps of brown ferruginous conglomerate, with occasional courses of large flints. All the internal walls, with certain obvious exceptions at the E end of the nave, belong to one or other phase of Despenser's alterations, and, though miscellaneous in character, are largely composed of small flints, with brick or ashlar dressings. The Cathedral must be envisaged without these intrusions and will be so described. The massive, rough stonework of the Cathedral would have been thickly rendered, inside and out, and the original appearance would have been fairly smooth and white with perhaps some ornament moulded in the plastering.

Excavations show that the earlier, wooden buildings occupied the site of the nave and were shorter and perhaps broader than the final Cathedral, but thanks to numerous graves and Despenser's deep pits, little can be discovered of their plan. The rebuilding in stone was on two phases, marked A and B respectively on the plan. They followed closely after one another and both probably date from the early eleventh century. As it now stands, the Cathedral comprises the lower part of a massive W tower, a narrow aisleless nave, the E end of which is flanked by two smaller towers, and, E of these again, a long transept with an apse leading directly off it. The final timber building was apparently of the same width as the present nave and had a square E end extending most of the way across the present transept. Then, in phase A, the stone transept, apse and E towers were added to the timber nave, to replace the square E end, with a floor about the same level. Phase A masonry can be distinguished by the four lowest courses being of flint, inside and out, above which the facing is of conglomerate. In this phase there is a sparing use of oolite ashlar, brought from beyond the Wash – one quoin-stone at each corner, long stretches at the base of the door-openings, which have, in Saxon fashion, no splay or rebate for the door, and, at the opening from the S tower to the transept, there is a thin version of the well-known late Saxon 'long and short' work. But the most remarkable features are the curious quarter-round pilasters on each angle. There are no exact parallels for them in right angles, but they occur in the angles between a number of the

characteristic East Anglian round towers of late Saxon type, such as ROUGHTON, and their corresponding W nave walls. They are, in fact, a variety of a rare but widespread early Romanesque detail, found after the Conquest in Norwich Cathedral. In phase B the W tower and nave were reconstructed in stone, including the most westerly pair of angle-pilasters. Here the great conglomerate courses go right down to the ground, with some admixture of flint and re-used Roman brick, and there is no original ashlar at all, except in the quoins of the tower, which are of finer-grained brown ironstone, and these may be later insertions. The original W door shows some splay, and the floor, though subsequently raised again, was levelled up to that of the E end. A third phase, involving alterations about the W end, with plentiful use of ashlar, may be shortly after the conquest.

Both the detail and the plan, in its final form, are in accordance with late Saxon (C11) ideas and depart from what we know of earlier English practice. The long transept and apse derive from an early Christian plan, found in the great basilicas of Rome. But this plan was widely derived in the C11 in northern Europe, usually in large aisled churches; here the transept is oddly attached to a plain aisleless nave. There appear to have been other instances of this in Eastern England in the early C11, for example, at Peterborough.

### The W tower

This may be seen from the bank that engulfs its exterior, or entered through the gap where the stones of the S jamb of the tower arch have been removed, leaving their impression on Despenser's blocking wall. The floor was originally at its present level; there was a tall and relatively narrow door from the W, now blocked, and a tower arch to the E, narrower than its successor, beneath which its base can be seen. All are made entirely of rough brown stones. A rounded stair-turret, as often found in early Romanesque building, faces the visitor as he approaches (it is now paired with another turret added by Despenser). This led to an upper chamber in the tower, which had a window looking into the nave. Such a chamber was a normal late Saxon feature, and here it may have acted as the Bishop's 'pew'; the whole tower was a simple example of the 'west work', or fore-hall of several storeys, which was greatly elaborated in Germany at this period. About the time the bishopric was moved the W door was blocked –

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plaster still covers the blocking externally – and was replaced by two doors in the nave: at the same time the tower floor was raised and the E arch rebuilt at greater width, with alternately coloured courses of ashlar, some still visible on the north side, and, possibly, since there is no other suggestion of ashlar-work in the original build, the quoin-stones were inserted at the same time.

### The Nave

This was long (nearly 67'), narrow and aisleless, but high; all is destroyed down to below the level of the windows, but the lower courses are well preserved on the S side. The interior is largely encumbered with Despenser's partitions, and the only surviving details are the remains of the two doors of early Norman character, mentioned above, opposite each other at the W end. Of the S door only the step and one shaft-base remains, concealed behind Despenser's turret, but the northern one is more complete: it shows bases of rough 'Attic' (classically inspired) type, which supported shafts moulded on drums attached to the jamb-stones.

### The Eastern Arm

This consisted of a transept, apse and two towers, in the angles between the transept and the nave, and probably communicating with both. The narrow arches leading from the towers into the transept are visible, though blocked; those into the nave are replaced by Despenser's brick doorways; the footings remain of the fairly broad 'triumphal' arch from the nave into the transept. The floors of both E towers were disturbed by Despenser, but they may have been intended to serve the same purpose as the earlier porticus, as burial-places. The north tower had a small doorway from the W, with ashlar stretcher-stones but no rebate for the door as seen also in the similar doorway in the N wall of the transept; these show that the approach for the clergy was from that side. Fragments remain of the thin 'long-and-short' type dressings of the arch from the S tower to the transept. The surviving stumps of the apse, preserve the thick rounded bases of the round angle-pilasters, seen elsewhere in the E arm. There is a suggestion that, as an afterthought, they planned to carry a row of such pilasters round the exterior but only one base remains. The apse probably contained the Bishop's throne, with the Altar in front of it, as is still seen at Norwich. This is an ancient arrangement, though revived in the C11; its appearance at Norwich

probably repeats the custom of the earlier cathedral, and the actual throne seems to have been transferred from an earlier cathedral since it shows traces of late Saxon carving, but it also bears signs of having been in a severe fire, of which there is no trace at Elmham, and it may, perhaps, have come from Dommoc.

### Despenser's Adaptations

The house created by the late C14 prelate out of the ancient church was of 'first-floor hall' type, that is, the living-rooms were all upstairs, with an undercroft or cellar below – an early mediæval arrangement, common in fortified houses, but too cramped for public pomp, and for the series of chambers and anti-chambers proper to a bishop 'on duty'. The plan must have been this: the hall occupied the space above the nave, the service rooms (buttery and so forth), the W tower, and the bishop's private solar, or camera was above the transept, while the kitchen was at ground level on the N side. The 'screens' passage was approximately above the passage between the two former doors at the W end of the nave, and all the approaches converged on this point. Despenser changed his mind three or four times about the internal arrangements, and the exact sequence is hard to disentangle: the first two phases appear to be earlier than the Earthworks – i.e. before 1388. The work with brick jambs to the doors precedes that with fine chamfered stone jambs and 'pyramid' stops, while the final stage is rougher and the masonry irregular. In the earlier phases a way led from the kitchen through a door in the N wall, to a wide stair-case, with a square landing, on the south side. Later, the approaches to this stair were blocked and an even wider and gentler staircase, on a scale quite unusual in a fairly small house of its date, and still remaining in part, was made on the north side. The relative grandeur of this stair and the blocking-off of the way to the kitchen suggests that this was now a main approach and that the E part of the nave where can be seen the stone bases for wooden posts to support the hall floor above, became an anti-chamber, approached from the E. The approach from the kitchen must have now been by an external staircase, and there was presumably a door at first-floor level between the old stair-turret and the added turret on the south side. At ground level of this apparent entrance, the first thing the visitor sees, is blocked by a massive rubble wall, which probably formed a drawbridge pit for the entrance above. The

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turrets, carried up at least as high as the main walls, would have given the entrance the appearance of a gate-house.

The walls of the transept were demolished down to a smooth-topped foundation, suggesting that the 'solar' end was finally rebuilt of timber, the sole-plate or timber sleeper resting on this foundation. In the apse Despenser built a flimsy series of semi-circular steps, now removed, which were probably the landing off a bridge over the moat to the E. Other features to be noticed are: the blocked window south of the W tower, indicating, by its masonry, that the clay bank was only raised to its current height in the final phase, several deep pits, now filled with shingle for safety, that in the E tower showing that this contained a garderobe, or privy, above; the moderate-sized kitchen fireplace and other remains of the external kitchen, namely, the stone 'bench' placed along the exterior of the N wall, probably as a footing for timber super-structure and a heavier wall masking the NE tower. The house, though small for a great lord, and essentially a private retreat, was not without the 'modern conveniences' of the time, as witness the scale of the staircases. A few small stone corbels, with fine leaf-ornaments, and fragments of stained glass and painted plaster have been found, which reflect an atmosphere of comfort.

The Bishop must have had a private oratory somewhere in the desecrated church, a possible position being in the NE tower. However outrageous his conduct, he was very orthodox in his way, and a hammer of Lollardry.

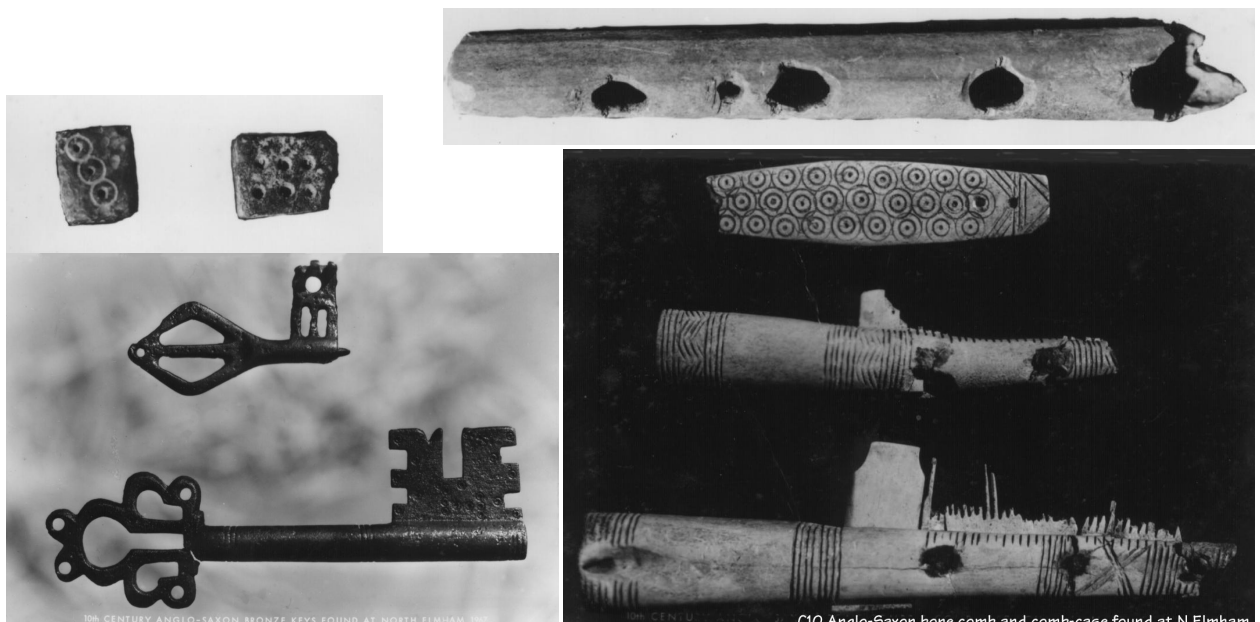
### The Architectural Significance of the Cathedral

It must not be supposed that all pre-Conquest cathedrals were on the small scale of Elmham. Several are known to have been large aisled churches on the ancient 'basilican' plan. But Elmham may have been more typical of those in unpopulous situations, such as Ramsbury or Dorchester-on-Thames. The high, narrow nave is suggestive of earlier churches in the N of England, but the multiple towers and E transept belong, in their unambitious way, to the fertile and varied development of Romanesque architecture on the Continent in the C11. East Anglia is very rich in architectural remains dating from just before and just after the Conquest. They have many regional peculiarities and are not typically English. A conspicuous characteristic is the round tower, but there were several forms of square tower as well, and Elmham provides an important link in a study that is yet far from complete.

*S. E. Rigold, M.A., F.S.A.: Ministry of Public Buildings and Works North Elmham - a history*

#### *Items found at North Elmham.*

*Top left: a pair of dice. Bottom left: C10 bronze keys  
Top Right: Part of a bone flute. Bottom right: A C10 bone comb and comb case.*



10th CENTURY ANGLO-SAXON BRONZE KEYS FOUND AT NORTH ELMHAM 1967

C10 Anglo-Saxon bone comb and comb-case found at N Elmham