



Repton Village History Group Newsletter

Summer 2024



<https://reptonvillage.org.uk/repton-village-history-group/>

Membership matters:

The AGM in May saw a few changes in roles with John Kidd taking on the treasurers role as well as secretary. Tim still looks after publications and items for the Village News and is the contact from the website. Russell still looks after the archive, Andy edits the newsletter, and Ivor coordinates things - meetings in particular. Aimee chairs committee meetings.

The group will be continuing with meetings or outings every other month:

- Friday 19th July: Visit to 1620's house (Donington le Heath Manor House). 10.45 in their car park please.
- Tuesday 17th September: The Cromford Canal in old photographs by Hugh Potter. Hugh is the archivist for the society and onetime editor of Waterways World Journal.
- Tuesday 19th November: South Derbyshire Parks and Gardens – Repton, Calke, Alvaston, Melbourne and Bretby by Phillip Heath. Phillip is the one time Heritage Officer for SDDC and a well-known and expert local historian and speaker.
- Tuesday 17th December: An extra session with a quiz by John and a talk by Andy and no doubt some festive comestibles.

Contributions to the newsletter.

These will always be gratefully received, and it is good if we can include items for all the different eras in which members have an interest. So we really do need contributions from as many members as possible please. You will soon get fed up with the very early Medieval period!

Scheduling Repton.....

Rev. Steve Short, the new Vicar, has been licensed and has now moved into Repton and a new Vicarage has been provided by the diocese up on Saxon Croft. That means the Diocese has to decide what to do with the old vicarage (no longer deemed acceptable for a young family) and the large area of land comprising the garden. They will feel under great pressure to sell it off.

With an astonishingly rich historical heritage - of international importance - it has absolutely no protection from development. The church and many of the school buildings are listed but there is no scheduling of any sort for this plot of land - still rich in unexcavated archaeology.

We have been working with Dr Mark Knight, Steve Baker (the County Archaeologist) and others to submit a proposal to Historic England that much of the historic core of the village be scheduled as an ancient monument. Apart from being the site of the early monastery and the Viking charnel monument and core of the winter camp, it is now known to contain (very) early Christian graves - possibly even from the Roman period.

Steve Baker, the County Archaeologist, has done a superb job - probably the most complete and comprehensive summary of our early history, backed up by an extensive bibliography and has requested that Historic England schedule it as an ancient monument.

.....but what do we Really Know?

We provided the initial historical outline for the application and this has been developed and amplified, but in the process, a couple of the assertions that I made were queried.

One is: who founded the Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monastery in Repton?

I have always understood that the Monastery was founded about 660AD by Werburgha (later Saint Werburgh) but have to confess that I have no historic source. It is probably something I picked up from (now departed) members of the History Group when I first got involved and I suspect it originated from Rev Hipkins - an antiquarian member of staff at Repton School in the 1890s.

There is a reference to the monastery being founded by St David in the Buchedd Dewi (Life of David) written nearly 500 years after his death by Rhygyfarch a Welsh Bishop. But David had died by 600AD when Mercia was very much a pagan kingdom and so this is at least 50 years too early unless the monastery was earlier than thought.

Penda was king of Mercia from 626 to 655 and was violent, and aggressive and pagan to the end. His eldest son, Peada, was to marry Alchflaed, a daughter of King Oswiu but there was a condition that he too converted to Christianity and be baptised. Peada took Christian instruction from his brother-in-law and Bede notes that it was a genuine conversion. In 653, he was baptised by Bishop Finan from Lindisfarne and returned with his wife, his entourage and 4 missionary priests (Cedd, Diuma, Betti, and Adda) and started a campaign of conversion. However, while Penda did not stop them, he remained pagan and in 655 set out to destroy Oswiu but was himself killed in the fighting. Christian king Oswiu became overlord of Mercia and with (now Christian) Peada ruling Mercia south of the Trent, Mercia was effectively a Christian kingdom. At this point one of the 4 priests (Diuma) became the first Bishop of Mercia.

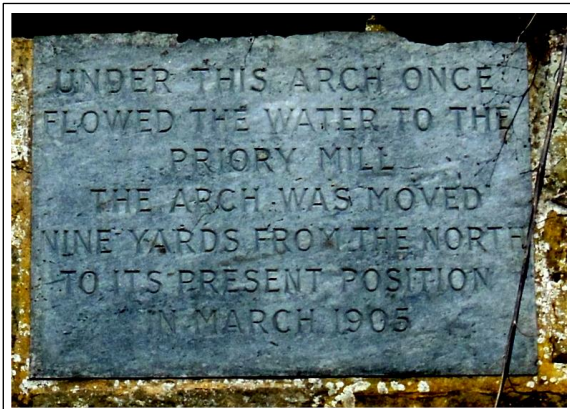
So the earliest date for the monastery has to be after pagan Penda's death in 655AD and St David cannot have been its founder. So who could it have been? In addition to someone organising and providing the religious input, Royal patronage and funding was essential.

- Diuma was actually made Bishop of two kingdoms and there is no record of him founding any monasteries.
- King Peada (possibly with Oswiu) founded Medehamstede (Peterborough) before 656 when he was murdered by the treachery of his wife and neither Bede nor the Anglo Saxon Chronicles record him doing this at Repton.
- Chad, brother to Cedd (another of the 4 priests), has been suggested, but he was studying in Ireland at Rath Melsigi from about 651 and was called by his brother from his studies to support him in founding the monastery at Lastingham in North Yorkshire. He succeeded Cedd as abbot in 664 and was consecrated Bishop of Northumbria with his Holy See in York. He was asked to step down in about 669 and retired to Lastingham. That year, Mercian King Wulfhere (Peada's successor), demanded a bishop and Chad was recalled and established his holy see at the monastery in Lichfield which had been founded by Bishop Wilfred.
- Werburgha was born in Stone in the early 7th century and died in 700AD. She was a daughter of King Wulfhere (Peada's brother and successor) and his wife Ermenilda (daughter of the king of Kent) and so, as Penda's granddaughter, was an extremely royal princess. She would be very aware of Royal Repton and was an earnest Christian seeking a contemplative life. Wulfhere initially rejected her appeal to enter the convent at Ely and it may be that she founded the Repton monastery at this point - providing royal support and funding. Cedd, and Diuma are unlikely to have been able to support her with the spiritual input, but there were also Betti and Adda (of the original 4 missionary priests).

She did enter the convent at Ely and eventually became its abbess (after 675AD) and was asked by King Æthelred to oversee the convents at Trentham, Weedon, Hanbury, Sheppy and Ely. Repton was a double monastic house (men and women) and not a convent which may be why it is not included in the list.

So, of the known possible candidates, Werburgha is the most likely - the same conclusion that Hipkins arrived at in the 1890s.

and the other is: did the brook flow across the lower paddock at Repton School or always down the outside of the eastern wall as now? Again, I inherited an understanding that the Priory Mill was on the lower paddock and that it was driven by the Brook running across the paddock. There is no doubt that there was such a channel - testified by the arch built into the school wall and its accompanying plaque, but it does refer to the mill, perhaps just an offshoot from the Brook.



We carried out extensive section surveys using resistivity and detected a mill pond, two channels and the fish ponds. One channel headed NW towards the Priory domestic buildings, presumably to provide domestic water and then flush through the neccesarium, the fish ponds were to the east of the paddock and in the centre was a third channel which we felt was the mill leat. Three channels rather than one.

Elizabethan court cases addressing restrictions in water flow by Sir John Harpur led us to the conclusion that he had diverted the brook down the outside of the priory grounds in 1606, but maybe that was always the case with a side feed through the arch in the

wall into the mill pond. The 1762 map would support this with similar indications on the 1666 sketch map. So a bit more thinking is required.

Another Repton clockmaker:

In the summer newsletter in 2020, we had an item on Repton Clockmakers. The existence of any was a surprise, but in the event 5 were identified including George Whitehurst who ran his famous brother's Derby clock works before settling in Repton to make clocks himself. Some of these clockmakers may have simply been using the Repton name to add status and it is likely that only George Whitehurst actually made mechanisms. Most were probably bought in and fitted into locally made cases.

Now Charles has identified two more clocks – with the face inscribed *William Ashmole Repton*. One was in an auction in Lichfield and in a sad condition and the other in a 2006 Antiques price guide.



The auction clock – “A Georgian 30 hour longcase clock, the hood with swan neck pediment, the circular glass door enclosing a 13.5 inch brass dial, depicting Roman numerals, engraved W.Ashmole, Repton, above a trunk door, on a box plinth, height 206cm. One swan neck missing, one weight and pendulum, other wear and usage.”



The price guide clock: “An oak and mahogany longcase clock by William Ashmole, Repton with painted dial and eight-day movement, c1795. 221 cm high.”

Charles' research has established that William was baptised in Repton in 1772, and married Sarah Wragg in St Alkmonds in Derby in 1795. He gave his profession as clockmaker. They had a son James who was baptised in 1796 in Repton but they had moved away to Staffordshire by 1801. William's father (William Snr) was a wheelwright married (in 1768) to Sarah Hutchinson, but earlier, in 1754, was apprenticed to wheelwright William Walker.

Charles concludes that, since brass dials went out of fashion, around 1780 (even in country villages), it is likely that the auction clock was William senior's work (William Junior being only 8 in 1780) and the price guide clock, the work of William junior - then aged about 23.

In the 1790s, the Ashmole family lived in what is now Swallow's Nest - 29 High Street so it is likely that both clocks were made there with movements and faces bought in and married to locally made cases.

The entry in the St Alkmonds marriage register.

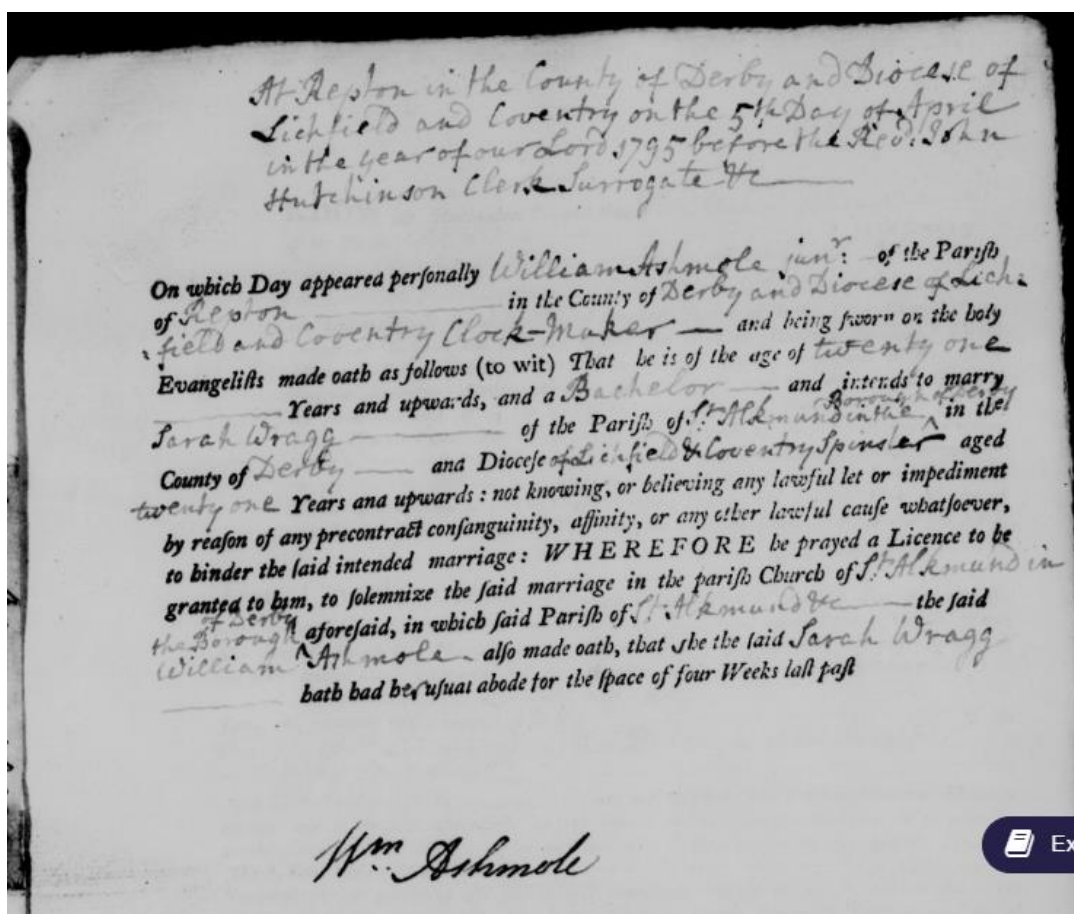
21st William Ashmole of the Parish of Repton and Sarah Wragg
of this Parish were married by Licence in this Church
the Seventh Day of April in the Year of our Lord, one
thousand, seven hundred & ninety five
By Mr. M. Bayley, Officiating Minister
This Marriage was solemnized between us } W^m Ashmole
In the Presence of us } Sarah Wragg
Robert Russell
Elizabeth Edge



The auction clock



No 29 Swallow's Rest



William (jnr) and Sarah Wragg's marriage licence – he says he is a clock-maker

Thomas Wright: In the last issue, we were starting research into Thomas Wright - a blacksmith born in Repton in 1698. A descendent had asked for help with the family tree, and Charles found references to him in his database and other sources but needed information from the enquirer about the family in order to sort out competing families.

We forwarded what we did know and asked him to get in touch with Charles but to no avail. Eventually we got through to him on a mobile phone and explained the problem and re-sent the information. Sadly there has been no contact from him. So this story escapes us.

The Other Anchor Church....

(Previously published in the newsletter of the Friends of Repton Parish Church)

There has been much interest recently in the Anchor Church caves at Ingleby but the name also appears in Anchor Church Field in Crowland near Peterborough. Long thought to be the location of the hermitage of St. Guthlac, the sites are sixty miles apart and it is reasonable to assume that the use of the names is coincidental. However, there are real connections between Repton and Crowland (originally Croyland).

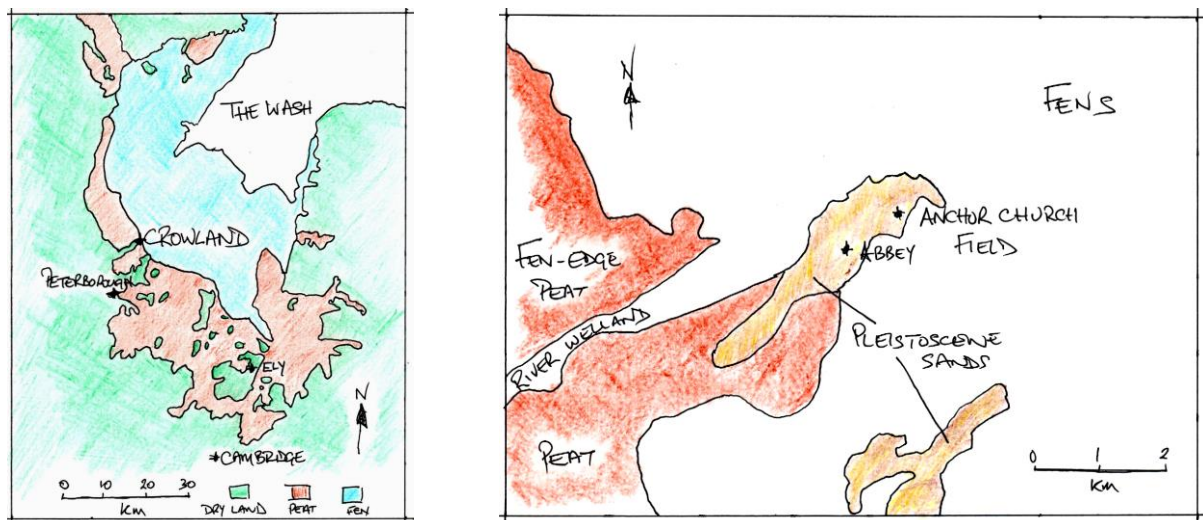
A romantic version of the story of Guthlac has him setting off from Repton's monastery in a boat saying that wherever it fetched up, there he would have a hermitage where he would live an isolated, prayerful life.

In fact it was very different. Most information comes from Felix's Life of Guthlac¹ written about 30 years after Guthlac's death but there are other sources including a very recent archaeological paper that has added a lot of contextual evidence².

Guthlac was a well brought up son of a wealthy, noble family but, aged 15 (c 689AD), his nature changed. With two others he caused misery through violent plunder and formed a war band which probably also fought as mercenaries for King Æthelred. However, after 9 years of this he was admonished by God and he insisted the band returned a third of what they had taken. Soon after (about 698 and aged 24) he was "*suddenly inspired with divine awe*" and realised that for many "*kings of yore*", a miserable death was the end of a wretched and sinful life - rendering their riches meaningless. He repented and entered the Benedictine monastery at Hrypadun (Repton). Over two years under Abbess Ælfthrytha he "*learned his psalms and canticles and hymns and prayers after ecclesiastical order*". He was not popular as he refused to drink alcohol and this irritated his brother monks. Learning about earlier hermits and anchorites he longed for a place in the wilderness. Guthlac would have been aware of the fens as immense and lonely marshes, bogs, islands, rivers and streams and from the recent archaeological dig it is now clear that the area had had immense religious significance for several thousand years and so was well understood in that context.

Given ecclesiastical permission, he travelled by the straightest route to the fens - probably to the monastery of Medeshamstede (modern Peterborough) founded by Repton centred King Peada about 655.

There he met Tatwine, a local man, who knew of an "*island especially obscure, which oftentimes many men had attempted to inhabit, but no man could do it on account of manifold horrors and fears and the loneliness of the wide wilderness*". They embarked on a boat and Tatwine guided them to Crowland.



Based on Figures 1 & 2 in the archaeology report²

His arrival was on St Bartholomew's Day and after staying there a few days, Guthlac returned to Repton for a couple of months and then set off back to Crowland with two servants and materials for a shelter.

They found a great mound of earth that was a robbed out burial mound and created his hermitage there.

He observed the rituals of the Benedictine order, but refused wool or linen clothing, wearing only skins. He ate nothing except barley bread and water, and that only after sunset.

Early on, he was plagued with despair about his undertaking to dwell alone in the wilderness, but he remembered his former sins and wickednesses, and when, after 3 days and in broad daylight, St. Bartholomew appeared before him, he "*was filled with spiritual joy*" and his resolve was strengthened.

Guthlac suffered many attacks from demons (including an attempt to starve him) and night time attacks by "*great hosts of the accursed spirits*" – "*in countenance horrible, and they had great heads and, a long neck, and lean visage: they were filthy and squalid in their beards: and they had rough ears, and distorted face, and fierce eyes, and foul mouths; and their teeth were like horses' tusks; and their throats were filled with flame, and they were*

grating in their voice ... [much more] ... and it seemed to him that all between heaven and earth resounded with their dreadful cries” On another occasion, they inundated his shelter and bound him and threw him into the black fen and sank him in the muddy water. Then they dragged him through thickets and “all his body was torn”. The torment went on with the devils challenging him to leave and on his refusal, an immense hoard of cursed spirits came toward him and brought him to hell’s door. He saw the foulness of the smoke and the burning flames and the way they tormented the souls of unrighteous men and he was terrified. The devils threatened to throw him into the torments of the abyss if he did not abandon his calling. When he rejected them they moved to thrust him into hell, but the appearance of St. Bartholomew in holy splendour caused them to hide. Bartholomew



St Bartholomew rescuing Guthlac from the mouth of hell.
Note the scourge.

commanded them to gently carry Guthlac back to his shelter and in mid-air they were accompanied by a troop of holy spirits. Bartholomew provided Guthlac with a scourge with which to defend himself. There were further attacks of different sorts, but now Guthlac was better able to deal with them.

It clearly was not so isolated an existence as might have been assumed. His presence was well known and visitors sought him out for healing, prophecy and advice. This included a young Æthalbald who had a claim to the kingdom of Mercia but had been exiled and was being hunted by the king - Coelred. He was sheltered by Guthlac but fretted as to whether he would become king. Guthlac prayed to God on his behalf and was able to assure him that he would be king and without bloodshed. In the event, Coelred is recorded as having died at a banquet in 716 in a frenzy, gibbering with demons and cursing the priests of God. Æthalbald replaced him. As king, Æthalbald was Repton centred (the last such) and in 757 buried in the Crypt at Repton. He had promised that if Guthlac’s prophecy was fulfilled, he would build him a monastery at Crowland. And so he did.

In 715, after 15 years in his hermitage, Guthlac was at his

prayers when he was attacked by a sudden illness and started to prepare himself for his entry into the heavenly kingdom. On hearing of his illness, the abbess at Repton sent a shroud and lead for his coffin. He was ill for 7 days and on the 8th “brought to the utmost extremity” and he died.

There is a tradition that Anchor Church Field just north east of the present Abbey ruins was the site of Guthlac’s hermitage and aerial photography and geophysical surveys in 2002 demonstrated significant archaeological remains. With this and the steady attrition of the site by farming, Duncan Wright and Hugh Willmott undertook a two year archaeological project in 2021 and 2022 which resulted in a (stunning) paper published this year.² This found clear evidence of a late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age henge which may have had a circle of timber posts inserted and a number of Burial Barrows – a Bronze Age ritual complex. After the Bronze Age, the henge seems to have been abandoned but there is evidence of use in Roman and Early Medieval periods (Guthlac’s time) with finds of 7th-9th century ceramic sherds and glass from drinking vessels - with subsequent use right through to post medieval times.

Antiquarian William Stukeley drew, in 1776, a sketch of a mound in Anchor Church Field with a small building on it and in spite of much damage in the 1880s, a mound was discernible into the 1950s but ploughed out in the last 60 years. Archaeological evidence is clear that there have been several phases of building on the spot probably as later generations encouraged the cult of St Guthlac with shrines and chapels.

Although there can be no absolute evidence that this is the site of Guthlac’s Hermitage, it is almost certainly the case.

The appearances of devils and evil spirits were clearly metaphysical and may have been induced by Marsh Fever (probably Malaria) or by Ergot poisoning - a fungus that can infect Barley. Nevertheless, a real spiritual tussle.

1) The Anglo Saxon version of the life of Guthlac - Felix before 749.

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Anglo_Saxon_version_of_the_life_of_s.html?id=fiUEAAAAQAAJ

2) Sacred Landscapes and Deep Time Mobility, Memory and Monasticism on Crowland - Wright and Willmott 2024

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00934690.2024.2332853> (paste into your browser)