The Seventh Century
Monastery of Stow Green,
Lincolnshire

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Some time before c.1086 Gocelin the Monk of Canterbury wrote a life of the seventh-century abbess St. Werburg. The details of her life and times that he provides are sparse. He states that she entered the religious life at Ely after the death of her father, Wulfhere, and was subsequently granted the custody of all the convents in Mercia by her uncle King Æthelred. Despite her responsibilities, however, she seems to have spent much of her time at Weedon (Northants.). But, Gocelin records, she died in c.700 in a community at Threekingham (Lincs.). Shortly after, her body was translated to Hanbury (Staffs.), in what can best be described as a well-planned-body-snatching raid, where it remained for some two hundred years until its removal to her final resting place at Chester.1 This account provides the earliest evidence for a monastery at Threekingham. Writing at about the same time, the author of the chronicle traditionally attributed to Florence of Worcester recorded much the same information in a somewhat briefer form but he may, nevertheless, be an independent authority.2 Both, however, almost certainly drew upon a now lost Old English life of St. Werburg and there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the tradition they preserve.3 Several later chroniclers recount the story of the saint and make notice of a monastery at Threekingham. But all are probably derived from, or are elaborations of, the accounts provided by Gocelin and Florence. The Liber Eliensis, a twelfth-century chronicle written at Ely, is no exception in so far as the life of St. Werburg is concerned.4 It is nevertheless of some importance in further elucidating the history of the foundation at Threekingham. Its account of an incident in the life of St. Ætheldreda, St. Werburg’s great-aunt, confirms circumstantial evidence which suggests that the monastery of Threekingham was actually situated in Stow Green and was founded in honour of the patron saint of Ely in the late seventh century.

At first sight, the name which identifies the monastery appears to indicate that the community was situated in Threekingham itself. In 1086 there were two churches attached to various estates in the settlement.5 Somewhat unusually for Domesday Book, their dedications are both given. Despite a complex history, it is clear that St. Peter’s is substantially represented by the present parish church. Half, divided in the ratio 1:2:1:2, belonged to the manors of the bishop of Durham, Ódo the Ablaster, Ulfvet and, almost certainly, Colunin in Newton.6 The remaining half cannot be traced in Domesday Book but probably belonged to the cant fee to which the advowson was attached in the twelfth century. The earliest part of the surviving fabric is Norman in date. St. Mary’s, the second church in Threekingham, has never been identified but was probably of some antiquity for it possessed half a carucate of land in its own right. It too belonged to the four manors in Newton.7 It might be supposed that one of these foundations was a vestige of the earlier monastery for it is not impossible that such an institution, in whatever etiolated form, had survived the Danish invasions and colonisation of the East Midlands. The almost complete absence of monastic foundations in the Lincolnshire Domesday is usually cited as evidence of the destruction of religious communities in the late ninth and tenth centuries.8 However, the survey is a most unreliable guide. The commissioners took little interest in specifically ecclesiastical matters and in particular unreformed houses of secular canons are often not recorded because they did not contribute to the income of a Norman tenant-in-chief. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that such communities existed in the county. There was some sort of monastic establishment at Wingham and the church of Castle Bytham was almost certainly a college of priests.9 The record of a relatively large number of clerics who held land in Lincolnshire in 1066 probably points to the existence of others.

It is not impossible, then, that one of Threekingham’s two churches was the one entrusted to St. Werburg by King Æthelred. Stow Green, however, some two miles south-east of Threekingham, is a more likely site for the monastery. If, as there is no reason to doubt, both Florence and Gocelin were citing earlier sources, the place-name presents no great obstacle to this interpretation. In the seventh and eighth centuries -ham names are more likely to have referred to estates as a whole rather than to specific settlement nuclei.10 As late as 1066, Stow was almost certainly in the same twelve-carucate hundred, the Lincolnshire equivalent of the vill in the eleventh century, as Threekingham and was tenurially related to it.11 For official purposes the name of the one was as good as the other for identifying estates within the hundred, regardless of actual location. Stow as a name is itself suggestive, meaning simply ‘place, place of assembly, holy place’, it often refers to important ecclesiastical centres.12 Stow St. Mary and Hibaldstow are notable local examples. Furthermore, there is evidence that the church was associated with the cult of St. Werburg’s great-aunt. In a late twelfth-century inquisition and confirmation of Sempringham Abbey’s charters, its dedication is recorded as St. Ætheldryth, that is Ætheldreda.13 In the later medieval period, the church was of some local importance. It had full parochial rights which extended into Bir thorpe where there was a dependent chapel.14 Significantly, it was also closely related to a fair at Stow Green. In 1275 Sempringham claimed by charter ‘a fair on the vigil of the feast of St. Æthelreda, the Baptist at the church of Stow’. It was thus held on 24th June which is the feast day of St. Ætheldreda.15 Professor Sawyer has recently drawn attention to the often intimate relationship between congregations gentium, that is traditional folk markets which were not subject to tithes levied by a lord, and early churches.16 That at Stow was probably of this type. Although a fair was granted by Henry III in 1268, this was clearly a confirmation of an existing institution.17 There are various references to the King buying goods at Stow in Lincolnshire in the early thirteenth century, but the first unambiguous reference to a fair at Stow Green occurs in 1233. The sheriff of Lincoln, for some unspecified reason, was ordered to prohibit the fairs of Sempringham and Stow next to Sempringham where they were accustomed to be held.18 Since the fair ground, as well as the church, was parcel of the Gant fee, it seems likely that it is represented in Domesday Book by the otherwise unattested market (fons) which Gilbert de Gant held in Threekingham in 1086.19 Thus, the existence of a fair which is associated with the cult of St. Ætheldreda tends to suggest that the church of Stow was of some importance in the eleventh century and possibly earlier.

Within this context, an episode in the life of St. Ætheldreda recorded in the Liber Eliensis assumes considerable relevance. It is said that on one of her journeys the saint
crosed the Humber at Winteringham and spent some time at West Halton in the West Riding of Lindsey where she founded a monastery. She then proceeded south towards Ely. But her journey was interrupted on account of the heat, and, resting in a certain place, her staff took root and sprouted. The chronicler notes that, ever after, the place was known as Ætheldreda's Stow and a church was built there in honour of the saint. 21 There is no other version of this story but it clearly has some basis in fact for the important church of West Halton is dedicated to St. Ætheldreda. 22 In the light of the dedication and later history of Stow church, Ætheldreda's Stow can, perhaps with some confidence, be identified with Stow Green. It seems likely, than, that it was the church there which King Æthelred entrusted to St. Werburg and in which she subsequently died.

In the light of the close association of markets and important ecclesiastical sites, the present market place, in the southeast angle of the crossroads at the junction of March Lane and the Horbling road, probably marks the location of the monastery at national grid reference TF094350. In a survey drawn up in 1769 (Fig. 1), a chapel yard is recorded in the northwest corner of the field and this was almost certainly the site of the medieval church. 23 One medieval reference implies that it was situated near to the main road for in 1308 the men of Scrodington were distrained to repair the bridges in the public street between Sleaford and the church of Stow. 24 Recent field walking by the Trust for Lincolnshire Archaeology has identified fragments of coffins and bone in the vicinity of the suggested site.

References
5. The Lincolnshire Domesday and the Lindsey Survey, eds. C. W. Foster, T. Longley, Horncastle 1924, 67/11.
9. D. M. Owen, Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire, Lincoln 1971, 47.
10. Lincolnshire Domesday, 16/8; 17/15; Owen, Church and Society, 2, 8.


