The History of Clementhorpe Nunnery

R. B. Dobson and Sara Donaghey
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By R. B. Dobson and Sara Donaghey

*With contributions by D. A. Brinklow and D. A. Stocker*

**Introduction**

The priory of Clementhorpe, as the only medieval nunnery in the immediate vicinity of the city of York and the first post-Conquest religious house for women in the whole of Yorkshire, has justifiable grounds for more scholarly attention than it has hitherto received. On the other hand, and like the great majority of the hundred or so houses of nuns founded in England and Wales between 1066 and 1216, the detailed history of the priory is very inadequately documented. It was accordingly all the more welcome that the redevelopment for housing by York City Council of an area bounded by the modern streets of Clementhorpe, Cherry Street and Lower Darnborough Street (Fig. 1) offered an opportunity to conduct excavations during 1976 and 1977. Records of a Roman mosaic pavement (RCHMY 1, 62) discovered during the 19th century provided the initial impetus for the excavations. The position of fragments of presumed precinct wall of the priory recorded on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map (City of York, Sheet 15, redrawn as Fig. 2) indicated that they too would be disturbed by the housing development. An area of approximately 390 sq m within the presumed precinct was therefore chosen for examination.

The excavations were directed in 1976 by Sara Donaghey and in 1977 by David Brinklow. The detailed archaeological results are to be found in *AY* 6, *AY* 8, *AY* 12 and *AY* 13. All finds and site records are lodged with the Yorkshire Museum, York, under the Trust and Museum accession numbers 1976.3 and 1977.3. A summary of the archaeology relating to the nunnery is printed below (pp. 5–6). Historical research was carried out by Sara Donaghey, and the shortened version of her report, which forms the subject of this fascicule, was prepared for publication by Professor R. B. Dobson.

So poorly recorded are the first years of the nunnery that, as the following summary account of Clementhorpe’s fortunes from the 12th century onwards will reveal the circumstances surrounding its foundation and early history remain deeply mysterious. Particularly regrettable is the absence of a cartulary of the sort that survives for only one (Nunkeeling) of the 24 medieval Yorkshire nunneries. However, references and allusions to the priory begin to multiply in the ecclesiastical, crown and city records of the 13th century and
Fig. 1 Location plan of the excavation site at Clementhorpe. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map with the sanction of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Crown Copyright reserved.) Scale 1:1250
later, even if — somewhat paradoxically — Clementhorpe Priory is never better documented than at the date of its final suppression on 31 August 1536. At no time in the preceding four centuries is it possible to generalize with much confidence about the internal religious life of this small but not unimportant community of York nuns. What can be better appreciated, as the following survey will suggest, is the more public role played by the nunnery in and around the city of York.

Fig. 2 The Clementhorpe area in 1852. (Redrawn from the first Ordnance Survey map of York)
Fig. 3 Excavation plan of the Clementhorpe site, indicating the main features of medieval and later date and clearly showing the distribution of burials, the position of the stone walls and fragments of surviving floor. Scale 1:200.
Archaeological Investigations

By D. A. Brinklow

Excavation revealed the nature of continuous occupation on the site from Roman times to the present day. Initially the naturally steep western bank of the River Ouse appears to have been artificially terraced during the 2nd century AD. A sequence of Roman occupation followed, typified by multi-roomed domestic structures, one of which contained the mosaic pavement found in the 19th century. These were occupied throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries and probably into the early post-Roman period. The evidence for post-Roman occupation was ephemeral although the insubstantial remains of a small pebble floor and a number of associated post-holes may relate to this period.

A massive structure of pre-Conquest date, of which only the cobble foundations survived, overlay the Roman building and in places used the remnants of its walls as footings. Little evidence remained to identify the function of the building which must have stood upon these foundations. Size alone would seem to suggest a public building and nothing was found to refute a possible ecclesiastical use. It is accordingly conceivable that this was the church postulated by some authorities to have been the forerunner of the priory (see p. 8).

It is possible to delineate the approximate extent of the precinct of St Clement’s nunnery from cartographic evidence since the position of some precinct walls is shown on a number of maps. The single fragment of presumed precinct wall which stood within the new housing development was examined in detail before full-scale excavation began. It was found to stand on footings containing post-medieval brickwork and is thus not in situ. This should not occasion surprise since its location and alignment are completely at odds with any known for the precinct wall proper.

Excavated structural remains of the nunnery were slight and widely dispersed since the area had been grossly disturbed during post-medieval times (Fig. 3). Almost 250 burials were recovered, much less disturbed than upstanding structures owing to their situation beneath the contemporary ground surface. These were concentrated into a number of discrete groups as if avoiding some upstanding features, evidence of which has long since disappeared. Males, females and children were all present, a discovery which need not be thought unusual since patrons, guests and servants may well have been interred in the same cemetery area as the nuns. Burial took place in either coffins or shrouds although in two instances stone cists were used.

Little sense could be made of the structural features in terms of a ground plan for nunnery buildings. The remains of floors were present in three separate areas: one of heavily worn unglazed floor tile; one of much repaired glazed and unglazed floor tile; and one where impressions of the tiles on their mortar base was all that remained. Although they were considerably worn, there was no evidence that these features had ever performed a domestic function. No rubbish was found, either in pits or accumulated on working surfaces; there was no evidence of hearths or indeed any evidence of burning at all. The few fragments of wall which remained gave little hint of the type of building which may have stood on this part of
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the site. They were largely of coursed limestone rubble although a single example in the east of the area excavated was faced with diagonally axed fine ashlar. A single padstone near the centre of the site suggested either a footing for a timber or perhaps the base for a column.

While there is little specific evidence to support the contention, it is not impossible that the majority of the structural remains form elements of the same building and that this might be seen as the priory church itself. Although the site of this is shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 2) to the south of the excavated area, little evidence can be found for this positioning. Indeed, if Stocker (p. 31 ff., below) is to be believed, the only remains likely to have survived for mapping are those of the south claustral range.

The identification of the fragments as part of the ground plan of the church would also explain the discrete areas in which burials occur (Fig. 3). Evidence from the wills of benefactors of the nunnery (p. 23, below) testifies to the practice of burial within the nunnery church; if burial took place only in the nave, aisles and chapels, with the structurally significant wall and pier areas remaining undisturbed, a pattern similar to that revealed by the excavation might well result. Continuity of ecclesiastical use of this particular part of the site from the pre-Conquest period onwards is a tempting if uncertain hypothesis.

The reason for the survival of so little structural material was that a series of post-medieval lime kilns had cut into the eastern edge of the excavated area. Remnants of the final firing of these features remained in the central firing chambers and included masonry from both the nunnery buildings and the Roman buildings below. Similar masonry also formed a significant part of the structure of the kilns themselves. The demand for stone and mortar must have been high in York during the later part of the 17th century, partly perhaps because of the ravages of the Civil War. A suppressed nunnery would have proved an ideal location for both stone quarrying and lime burning; the result is this ill-understood confusion of tiny fragments exposed in the 1976–77 excavations.

Clementhorpe before the Foundation of the Nunnery

It was a natural assumption of early historians of York that the place name of Clementhorpe was derived from the foundation, in the years around 1130, of the nunnery dedicated to St Clement. On the contrary, the name must have had a considerably older, although admittedly still obscure, history. In the first place, there is now general agreement that the Scandinavian element thorp is in origin Danish and usually represents a secondary settlement, most commonly an outlying farmstead or a small hamlet dependent upon a larger place (Smith, 1937, 284; cf. Cameron, 1970). Nevertheless any attempt to utilize this suffix to assess the date and scale of Danish colonization in England is fraught with controversial problems which have long puzzled historians and archaeologists alike. The name Clementhorpe, it must be stressed, should be placed in the context of the remarkable frequency of thorp place-names in eastern Yorkshire and especially in the vicinity of the city of York itself. Domesday Book, compiled in 1086, contains no less than 30 thorp entries within the Annesti Wapentake (West Riding) of Yorkshire, many of these being in the immediate
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environs of York (Darby and Maxwell, 1962, 491). Several of these names no doubt arose from the earliest Danish colonization of the area in the late 9th century: Professor Lindkvist’s study of the street names of the city has suggested that many of these originated from the beginning of Scandinavian settlement in 876, and that others were formed in the period continuing until the early 12th century (Lindkvist, 1926). More recently, Professor Peter Sawyer has contended that *thorp* names on markedly secondary land probably represent a later extension of settlement following the assimilation of the native Anglo-Saxon with the Scandinavian populations, most probably in the last century before the Norman Conquest (Sawyer, 1962, 145–67). In any event the place-name of Clementhorpe is likely to have emerged during or after the Scandinavian colonization of the York region and presumably refers to a small secondary settlement of inhabitants from the city, perhaps formed as the urban population increased.

The addition of the personal name ‘Clement’ as a distinguishing first element must also have occurred at some time during the course of Scandinavian settlement in the suburbs of York. The cult of St Clement (died c. AD 100), one of the first popes and apostolic fathers, developed particularly rapidly throughout western Christendom after the translation of his relics to Rome c. 868. Thanks no doubt to the maritime adventures apocryphally attributed to the saint and to his iconographic emblem of an anchor, his legend made a particular appeal to the sea-faring Scandinavians. Some surviving seals of Clementhorpe Nunnery, three of which are reproduced as Plate III, show the saint carrying a representation of what may be a boat or a book, and with his hand raised in blessing. Quite apart from its popularity in Norway and Denmark themselves, his cult clearly prospered to an exceptional degree in 10th and 11th century England. Of 48 early church dedications to St Clement in this country, twelve are to be found in Wessex and no less than 32 in the Danelaw, Kent and London: thus St Clement’s, Eastcheap, was founded in the 10th century and the churchyard of St Clement Danes in London was being used as a Danish burial ground within at least a generation after 1002 (Brown, 1951, 71–3; cf. Arnold-Forster, 1899, 275–88). As the nunnery church of Clementhorpe seems to have been the only medieval church in Yorkshire dedicated to the saint, it seems hard to resist the conclusion that his appearance in that place-name was due to the Scandinavian settlers of York and its vicinity at some indeterminable date in the 10th or 11th century.

However, the first recorded reference to Clementhorpe by that name only dates from c. 1080. It occurs within a document (copied into the *Magnum Registrum Album* of York Minster) which records the results of an enquiry by the archbishop of York into the extent of his rights and possessions within his see. Among the ‘privileges and legal titles which Archbishop T. possesses through all York, within and without the city’ is mentioned ‘all Clementhorpe (*and eal Clementesthorpe*)’ (YML D and C *Magnum Registrum Album* 1, fo 61; cf. Peacock, 1904–5). In this late Old English document the archbishop in question can be no other than Thomas I, the first Norman archbishop of York (1070–1100); and additional evidence corroborating a date of c. 1080 is provided by the list of witnesses and the inclusion there of Hugh the Sheriff of Yorkshire who held that office from 1069 to 1080–88 (Harvey, 1965). Although Clementhorpe is not mentioned in Domesday Book’s account (clearly less than comprehensive) of the possessions of the see of York, it seems abundantly clear that the
The site of the future nunnery had formed part of the patrimony of the archbishops of York in the late Anglo-Scandinavian period. Whether or not Clementhorpe was a constituent part of the controversial archbishop’s shire mentioned in the Domesday survey of the city of York, it presumably was one of the extensive archiepiscopal holdings to the south and west of the city on the eve of the Norman Conquest.

Further confirmation of the archbishop of York’s overlordship of Clementhorpe is provided by an inquisition of 1106 which shows certain similarities to that of c. 1080. This document records an enquiry held by commissioners of Henry I, in response to an attempt by Osbert the Sheriff and other royal officers to undermine the rights of the see of York (Nicholl, 1964, 29). The chapter and canons of York were called to show title to their privileges and jurisdictions within and without the city, and they asserted: ‘all the toll in Clementesthorp from all the ships which touch there shall be the archbishop’s, and below Clementesthorpe as far as the archbishop’s land stretches; and the whole custom of fish shall be the archbishop’s from both sides of the water’ (et totum theloneum erit archiepiscopi in clementesthorp de omnibus navibus quae illic applicuerint, et juxta clementesthorpe in ferius quantum terra Archiepiscopi durat: et tota consuetudo piscium Archiepiscopi ex ambabus partibus aquae) (Leach, 1891, 190–6). This document therefore confirms the Domesday statement that the archbishop had the full custom of his shire. Clementhorpe is named and included as part of an extensive trading area south-west of the city, whose prosperity doubtless derived from the expansion of commerce during the Anglo-Scandinavian period (Dickens, 1952 55). It will be seen later how the nunnery was able to capitalize on its proximity to the river by way of trade and fishing rights.

Finally one must consider the possibility of the existence of a church at Clementhorpe prior to the foundation of the nunnery. Several authorities assert this view; none, however, offers references to substantiate the claim. Charles Brunton Knight presumably had in mind the inquest of 1080 when he argued that: ‘It may be that this nunnery was the re edification of an earlier foundation for the district bore the name of Clementhorpe in 1070’ (Knight, 1944, 145–6). According to the recent account of the nunnery by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments: ‘It incorporated an earlier parochial church dedicated to St (Dement, which had already given its name to the locality’ (RCHMY 3, 48). The second part of this statement is correct as regards the origins of the place-name, but there seems no clear evidence for the first assumption. Possibly confusion has been caused by a supposed ‘lost’ church of St Mary, for in fact the document of 1080 does complicate the issue somewhat by listing a St Mary’s Church immediately after Clementhorpe in the list of the archbishop’s possessions (and eal Clementesthorpe and Sancte Marie circa...) (Peacock, 1904–5, 413). However, Dr John Harvey (1965, 389) has provided reasoned argument that the church referred to may have been St Mary Bishophill Junior, within the walls of York itself.

Nevertheless the archaeological investigations of the nunnery site (p. 5, above) did locate an earlier building than the nunnery, in part constructed on the foundations of a ruined Roman town-house, which could conceivably have been a church; both coins and other artefacts of Anglo-Scandinavian date were found on the site. It remains possible, therefore, that there was indeed an earlier church on the site, and Anglo-Scandinavian occupation there has at least been verified.
The Foundation of Clementhorpe Nunnery

The Benedictine nunnery of Clementhorpe was established, according to its foundation charter (Burton, 1979, 6), almost certainly between c. 1125 and 1133, on the eve of the most expansionist of all ages in the history of English monasticism. Although by the early years of the 12th century there were already a score or so of English nunneries in existence, these were all situated in the south of England or the midlands; Clementhorpe was the earliest post-Conquest nunnery to be established in Yorkshire, inaugurating a wave of foundations of female convents in the county during the subsequent generation. As Dr Janet Burton (1979, 9) has shown in a recent study of the subject which makes it unnecessary to provide further details here, ‘by 1160 seventeen nunneries had come into existence’ within Yorkshire, a total which finally rose to 24 in the early 13th century. Obviously enough, the foundation of Clementhorpe can only be properly understood in the context of a widespread desire on the part of 12th century clerics and laymen to provide suitable institutions within which women as well as men could follow a religious vocation. But it should be noted that Clementhorpe was the only Yorkshire nunnery to be located near a large town and indeed the only nunnery ever sited very near York itself; the only other religious houses for women within a ten mile radius of the city were Wilberfoss, Thicket, Nun Appleton, Sinningthwaite, Nun Monkton and Moxby. Moreover Clementhorpe holds a special place among the two dozen Yorkshire medieval nunneries (Fig. 4) in being the only one to have been founded entirely by an ecclesiastic — Archbishop Thurstan of York.

Thurstan, born at Bayeux c. 1070 and archbishop of York from 1119 to 1140, is justifiably famous as the single most influential patron of northern monasticism in the 12th century; his decision to establish a nunnery near his cathedral city seems a not unnatural development of his enthusiasm for the new or newly expanding religious orders of the early 12th century. Certainly all the available evidence suggests that the foundation of Clementhorpe was very much the result of Thurstan’s own unaided personal initiative. Of all the possible sites at his disposal, Clementhorpe had obvious attractions in lying a few hundred yards from the walls of the city of York and less than a mile from his own cathedral. Presumably the site, on elevated ground to the south-west of the city, enjoyed a pleasant aspect. The Ouse ran close by along the eastern edge of the precinct, providing a convenient means of communication as well as access to river traffic; indeed the nunnery later maintained a staithe at this point. It was also natural that Archbishop Thurstan should choose to dedicate his new nunnery to St Clement, who had already given his name to the site. In the mid 1130s, at almost exactly the date that Clementhorpe nunnery was founded, Archbishop Thurstan helped to endow a chapel dedicated to St Clement established by Ilbert de Lacy in Pontefract Castle (Holmes, 1897).

Fortunately the initial foundation charter of the nunnery, witnessed by Dean Hugh and many of the Minster clergy, still survives (Pl. II) and provides an accurate impression of the priory’s first endowments at the hands of Archbishop Thurstan (BL Cotton Ch. XI, 66; EYC 1, no. 357, p. 278; for the latest discussion of the date of this charter see Burton, 1979,
Apart from the site of the nunnery itself (*locum in quo monasterium et edificia monialium constructa sunt*), these included two carucates of land within an unspecified area of the city as well as a rent of 20 shillings per annum from the archbishop's Ian in York. In Southwell the nuns acquired from the archbishop six perches of land on which to build a guest house for their own use in addition to rents and tithes from the archbishop's mills and two acres of land inside and outside the town. Moreover, the new nunnery also acquired lands in Otley and Cawood as well as rents and tithes in Bishop Monkton and Bishop Wilton (Fig. 5). The priory of Clementhorpe accordingly began its history with a not inconsiderable but an unusually widely scattered series of estates and rents, accurately reflecting the far-flung patrimony of the archbishops of York themselves. By 1133, the last likely date for the issue of this charter, the nuns of Clementhorpe were accordingly assured of a comparatively adequate income from the archbishop's endowments. What is inevitably less certain is the precise date at which the nuns first took up residence at Clementhorpe and their buildings began to rise above the ground. By the early 1140s, shortly after the archbishop's own death in 1140, the dean and chapter of York confirmed his original charter in terms which suggest that the nunnery was now well established (*EYC* 1, no. 358, p. 279).
In the closing years of his pontificate Archbishop Thurstan is also known to have been preoccupied with the selection of the first prioress of his newly-founded convent. His initial choice fell on the famous 12th century recluse, Christina of Markyate, whose enforced marriage, after her attempted seduction by Ranulf Flambard, the notorious bishop of Durham, the archbishop had allegedly annulled. According to the author of the life of Christina of Markyate, ‘she had frequent visits from the heads of celebrated monasteries in distant parts of England and from across the sea, who wished to take her away with them and by her presence add importance and prestige to their places. Above all the archbishop of York tried very hard to do her honour and make her superior over the virgins whom he had gathered together under his name at York . . . but she preferred our monastery [St Albans]’ (Talbot, 1959, 124–7; cf. Nicholl, 1964, 195–9).

After this exceptionally interesting if abortive attempt to appoint as the first prioress of Clementhorpe a holy woman famous for her sanctity and chastity, the archbishop must have been compelled to look elsewhere. It is a comment on the inadequacy of the documentation for the early years of the nunnery’s history that the first identifiable prioress of his convent only appears as late as 1192 in the person of a certain Alice (Knowles et al., 1972, 224).

Fig. 5 The major estates of Clementhorpe Nunnery
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The Nuns of Clementhorpe

In a small nunnery like that of Clementhorpe, the detailed routines of daily life and organization probably always passed largely unrecorded. Certainly the surviving evidence is very fragmentary, even if occasional clues to the patterns of life within the convent are provided by the records of some archiepiscopal visitations, land proceedings, and wills and testaments. Such references suggest, even if they are too scarce absolutely to prove, that in most respects the conduct of the religious life at Clementhorpe conformed to the general outlines established for the lesser medieval English nunneries as a whole by the classic study of the late Eileen Power (1922). The personalities, religious vocations and even the identities of the great majority of the nuns of medieval Clementhorpe are now impossible to recapture, but as elsewhere it is the prioresses of the convent who have left most trace in surviving records.

At Clementhorpe, which never seems to have been supervised by a male custos, the prioress herself must have been the crucial figure in the administration of the estates as well as the internal life of her nunnery. For this reason alone most prioresses of Clementhorpe are likely to have been women of comparatively high social status. Thus Constance Basy, elected prioress of Clementhorpe in 1315, was the daughter of the prominent York citizen Roger Basy, who had represented the city at the parliament of 1295, had helped to build the river wall by the Ouse in 1305 and was to found a chantry in the church of St Mary Bishophill Senior in 1319 (Knight, 1944, 204). Most prioresses no doubt emerged from the ranks of their community: Margaret Carr, Margaret Frankelayne and Isabel Ward had all been nuns of Clementhorpe, while the will of Elizabeth Delaryver alludes to the gift of a salt cellar to her sister Margaret, one of the convent’s nuns in 1454 who became prioress two years later (BI Reg. Wolsey 27, fos 13, 20, 40; BI Prob. Reg. 2, fo 301). At least three Clementhorpe nuns also left their convent to become prioresses elsewhere in Yorkshire: Katherine Chapman was confirmed prioress of Thicket in 1525, one of her colleagues was elected prioress at Rosedale in the same year, and Elizabeth Kilburn became prioress of Nunburnholme in 1534 (BL Harleian MS 6972, fos 52v–53; Power, 1922, 360 n. 2).

In a number of instances documents relating to the election of the prioress have also survived. These record her lawful election by the nuns, the approval of her election by the archbishop, the qualities required of her, the vows she took, and details of the actual process of her installation. We know for example that the confirmation of Christabel Lancaster as prioress in 1490 took place within the nunnery church under the auspices of John Reynolds, commissary of the archbishop’s vicar-general; and it is further recorded that she took her profession of obedience there (Reg. Thomas Rotherham 1, 62). The confirmation proceedings of the election of Margaret Carr in 1515 describe her election and declaration as prioress by the nuns of the house. Her qualities are described in fulsome, if conventional, detail: she is portrayed as prudent and discerning in behaviour and commended for her learning and experience in spiritual and temporal affairs; similarly, in November 1518, Isabel Ward, the last prioress, was made responsible for the care, rule and administration of the house and declared to be in corporal possession of it (BI Reg. Wolsey 27, fos 13, 40v). Frequently there was a lapse of time, usually about three months, between the death or resignation of the previous
priore and the election of her successor, a period during which the nuns were able to consider and choose their new head. According to the account of the election of Beatrice de Remington in 1396, the election then took place within the nunnery chapter house. After her confirmation, the prioress was seated in her stall on the south side of the quire of the church by the archbishop’s vicar general, John of Rotherham. He assigned her to her place in the chapter house and, after receiving an oath of obedience from her, the convent proclaimed its humble obedience *viva voce* to the new prioress (BI Reg. Arundel 14, fo 60). Margaret Carr, elected prioress in 1515, made her vow of obedience in English to the archbishop on entering office (BI Reg. Wolsey 27, fo 13).

The election of a prioress was a complex business, often provoking disputes. For example, in 1316, following the death of Prioress Constance Basy who had been elected in the previous year, there was rivalry between two candidates for the vacant office, Agnes de Methelay and Beatrice de Brandesby. This dispute divided the nunnery into two factions, which even led to each party electing its own candidate as prioress. Obviously such a situation could not prevail indefinitely. Although the election was an internal affair, the licence and agreement of the archbishop was nevertheless needed. In this instance, the dean and chapter were required to arbitrate. Accordingly Robert Pickering, dean of York, and Robert Ripplingham, chancellor of the Minster, were deputed by the cathedral chapter to act as the archbishop’s intermediaries in settling the dispute. They did so by annulling the election and admitting Agnes de Methelay as prioress, a fact duly recorded in Archbishop Greenfield’s register for 26 July 1316 (Reg. Greenfield 5, 249).

The most common cause for the election of a new prioress was naturally the death of her predecessor. Thus the register of Archbishop Wolsey records the vacancy of the office on the death of Margaret Carr in 1516, and at the same time the confirmation of her successor Margaret Frankelayne (BI Reg. Wolsey 27, fo 20v). However, there were some cases of resignation. Thus after serving for eight years as prioress, Agnes de Methelay resigned her office in 1324. The reason is not given, although her ‘free resignation’ is mentioned. The sub-prioress and nuns petitioned Archbishop Melton for permission to nominate a successor, and he allowed this with a proviso reiterating the qualities which a prioress should possess (BI Reg. Melton 9, pt 1, fo 199v). The duties of the office proved too burdensome for at least one other prioress. In 1456, Margaret Holtby petitioned Archbishop William Booth for permission to resign because she was ‘exhausted and tired out by divers burdens and infirmities, . . . has lost the strength of her body, and has moreover little power to carry out or supervise the care, rule and administration of the house’ (BI Reg. Booth 20, fo 8). Her resignation was accepted by the archbishop and he further ordered the house to elect a fitting successor.

The prioress is also mentioned frequently, and often named, in late medieval wills, either as the recipient of a gift, or as witness or executrix. Margaret Delaryver, prioress from c. 1456 to 1490, was a beneficiary several times. In 1466, Margaret Stapilton left her a salt cellar of silver, parcel gilt; in the will of Elizabeth Medlay (1471) she received 16d., a spoon and a box, and was also named as executrix. The will of William Walles in 1479 mentioned her as an executrix and he gave her 3s.4d. In 1477, Isabel Bruce also named her as executrix and left her a bronze pot and 20s. Similarly, Isabel Aske is mentioned as prioress in the will of
Elizabeth Conyers in 1512 when she received 10s., a pair of linen sheets, two cushions and also witnessed the will (BI Prob. Reg. 4, fos 110, 160v; 5, fos 17v, 163v; 8, fo 82).

Such references certainly suggest considerable bonds of kinship and friendship between the prioresses of Clementhorpe and the wealthier members of urban and rural society in their vicinity. The same must have been true of the great majority of the Clementhorpe community, recruited as they apparently were from the city and environs of York. Admittedly the precise geographical and social origins of the nuns of Clementhorpe can rarely be determined. Some certainly joined the nunnery from Yorkshire villages like the Isabel of Studley Roger who was licensed to enter the convent by Archbishop Greenfield in 1310, provided that she proved to be of ‘bone vite et conversacionis honeste’ (Reg. Greenfield 2, 94).

Roger de Moreton, a prominent citizen and mercer of York, in his will made in 1390, left four marks to buy clothing ‘to Isabel, my daughter, a nun of St Clement’s, York’. Roger de Moreton also bequeathed 13s. 4d. to his sister Helen who was another nun of Clementhorpe (TE 1, 133–4). No doubt, like most medieval English nunneries, Clementhorpe Priory served as a convenient resting place for unmarried daughters and sisters of the more affluent members of Yorkshire society as well as a home for those with a more committed sense of religious vocation. Similarly analogous evidence has persuaded most historians of the nunnery that its total size probably never exceeded the conventional number of thirteen thought suitable for a small Benedictine nunnery. It would be unwise to be so certain. Although only eight nuns and nine servants were recorded at the time of the suppression of the house in August 1536, a list of pensions being paid to the dispossessed nuns fifteen years later records the names of fifteen women, including that of Isabella Ward, the last prioress, still receiving a payment of £6 13s. 4d. per annum (VCH 3, 130). The priory no doubt regularly also included several non-religious boarders like Christiana Cayli, a child of nine years old, entrusted to the care of the nun Joan Saxton in 1312 (Reg. Greenfield 2, 126–7).

How far the presence of lay residents, and of nuns lacking a serious religious vocation, militated against a zealous religious life within the convent is at Clementhorpe, as in other medieval nunneries, a vexed issue on which the visitation and other records contained within the archiepiscopal registers can throw only occasional if at times intriguing light. In 1300, for example, a royal assize roll records how late one evening certain men came to the priory gate of Clementhorpe, leading a saddled horse. Here Cecily, a nun, met them and throwing off her nun’s habit rode off with them to Darlington, where she proceeded to live with Gregory de Thornton for three years or more (VCH 3, 129). Ten years later, in 1310, an unspecified offence was committed by Joan Saxton, who was ordered by Archbishop Greenfield to reside within the cloister and convent of Clementhorpe at all times and was forbidden to hold any office within the convent. For recreation, she was allowed to walk in the orchards and gardens, but only in the company of other nuns. Twice a year she was permitted to receive friends and relations, but only in the presence of the prioress or other discreet nuns. Finally, she was forbidden further contact with Dame Alice Waleys and, if the latter was still in the convent, she was to be sent away before Whitsuntide (Reg. Greenfield 2, 80–1). Obviously the two women, nun and secular, had had an unfortunate influence on each other and the archbishop had decided that Alice must leave before further scandals arose.
In 1313 Archbishop Greenfield was again forced to intervene in the internal affairs of the nunnery when he set up a commission to try John, son of Ralph the Hosier of York, a priest, for the crimes of incontinence and incest with a Clementhorpe nun, Alice of Leeds (Reg. Greenfield I, IDS). In 1318 there is mention of another apostate, Joanna of Leeds. Archbishop Melton ordered the dean of Beverley to return the nun to her convent and the tale of her offence is recorded in vivid detail. Apparently Joanna had defected from her religious order and left the nunnery. However, in order to make her defection credible, she had fabricated her death at Beverley and, with the aid of accomplices, even staged her own funeral there. The archbishop was prepared to take a lenient view of these excesses. He directed the dean of Beverley to warn Joanna of the nature of her sins and, if she recanted them within eight days, to allow her to return to Clementhorpe to undergo a penance. Melton further urged the dean to undertake a thorough investigation of the case, and to discover the names of Joanna’s accomplices so that he might then take suitable action (BI Reg. Melton 9, pt 1, fo 326v). Another apostate, Isabel Studley, was punished by Melton in 1331. In 1315, she had been admitted as a nun by Archbishop Greenfield. However, she had later been found guilty of ‘sins of the flesh, apostasy and other excesses’, and had been sent by Melton to Yedingham to undergo a penance: there she had reformed her ways and now sought readmission to the nunnery. In the autumn of 1331 Melton directed that she was to return to Clementhorpe on condition that if she committed further offences, or was blasphemous, insolent, disobedient, quarrelsome or aggressive towards the prioress or nuns, she would be transferred to another house permanently as a penance for her sins (BI Reg. Melton 9, pt 1, fo 230v; cf. Power, 1922, 600–1).

At the other extreme, nuns who wished to lead a life of stricter seclusion sometimes became anchoresses within their convents. They dwelt in small cells, frequently attached to the church, enduring a solitary confinement of some rigour. Although there may well have been an anchoress at Clementhorpe in the 13th century, written records of one there do not occur until two centuries later. The first reference is in 1449, within the will of John Witton, who left 12d. ‘to the recluse at Clementhorpe’; in 1466 William Hayton of Peaseholme also left 12d. to the ‘anchorite Sancti Clementis in suburbiis Ebor’. In 1468, the will of Elizabeth Sywardby included the sum of 20d. ‘in elemosina anchoritae de Clementhorpe’ (BI Prob. Reg. 2, fo 235; 4, fo 71v; TE 3, 168). In none of these wills is the name of the anchoress recorded. However, in the later part of the 15th century, when the majority of references occur, one anchoress at Clementhorpe is named as Alice Derby. In 1467, Robert Est bequeathed to her an image of St John the Evangelist in white alabaster, a small cupboard, and 6s. 8d. The will of Isabel Bruce in 1477 also mentions Dame Alice Derby, anchoress in the same place (Clementhorpe), and makes a bequest of 16d. to her (BI Prob. Reg. 5, fo 17v; TE 3, 160). Other references to the presence of an anchoress at Clementhorpe occur in wills of 1479, when William Walles, chaplain, left 4s. to her, and of 1483 when John Ince, a citizen and merchant of York, left 13d. (BI Prob. Reg. 5, fos 163v, 308). The frequency of such allusions, at least in this period, suggests that the presence of an anchoress within the nunnery had probably become usual. Clementhorpe, at least on one occasion, also provided the Yorkshire countryside with an anchoress: in 1322 a former nun, Joan Sperry, left to become an anchoress at Beeston near Leeds (Power, 1922, 365 n. 3).
Much more essential to the religious life of the nunnery at Clementhorpe were the services, and especially the administration of the sacraments, provided by priests attached to the convent. John and William, two ‘capellani Sancti Clementis’, figure as witnesses to a deed as early as the 1170s; and in the 1260s a certain Richard was ‘tunc sacerdos domus sancti Clementis’ (Bod. L Dodsworth E7, 1, fos 37–8, 83). The single most interesting revelation provided by the will (12 May 1407) of Thomas Kylburn, a resident of Clementhorpe parish whose daughter had become a nun there, are his legacies to no less than five parish chaplains or clerks (BI Prob. Reg. 3, fo 264). On the eve of the suppression of the convent, the nuns of Clementhorpe employed as chaplain Edmund Middleton, who received regular provisions as well as an annual salary of £5 6s. 8d. (PRO SC/6, 4641, memb. 9v). Equally indispensable were the duties provided by the lay officials and servants who ministered to the needs of the nuns within the convent and also supervised the management of their estates. Unfortunately references to the servants of the Clementhorpe nunnery are very infrequent; but it is known that in 1414 the prioress had a servant in her employment, Adam Bramham by name, who was capable of seizing the chattels of a recalcitrant husbandman reluctant to fulfil his obligations to the priory (Baldon, 1895, 236). On the analogy of the evidence surviving for the other small Yorkshire nunneries, the size of the Clementhorpe household was probably comparatively modest. Nevertheless Thomas Kylburn’s will of May 1407 included bequests to Adam, the nuns’ servant, as well as to a kitchen woman, two carters and four agricultural workers (cultoribus). When the priory was finally suppressed, Leonard Beckwith, the receiver of Clementhorpe, awarded nine servants a total sum of £4 2s. 8d. (PRO SC/6, 4641, memb. 14v).

As was only too understandable in the case of a nunnery sited so close to a large urban centre, the single most difficult problem facing the nuns of Clementhorpe during their 400 years of existence was apparently the exclusion of undesirable characters from their precincts. According to the evidence derived from archiepiscopal visitations, unfortunately largely confined to the early 14th century, there were always likely to be several laywomen resident within the convent. In a visitation of 1310 Archbishop Greenfield had to order the removal of a private house actually built within the nunnery precinct by Dame Alice Waleys, and he proceeded to prohibit the residence within the convent of all girls more than twelve years old as well as of all secular women except servants, washerwomen and the daughter of a certain Thomas of Leake (Reg. Greenfield 2, 31, 80–1). Similarly, amongst the injunctions produced by Archbishop Melton when he visited Clementhorpe in 1317 was one which forbade the nuns there to have any intercourse of any sort with women who had not entered the sisterhood, in case such acquaintance might arouse evil suspicion. Melton also prohibited the practice whereby children and secular women slept in the common dormitory of the house with the nuns (VCH 3,129). However, even the more vigilant medieval archbishops of York were prepared to tolerate the relaxation of the rules of strict seclusion: in 1315 Archbishop Greenfield himself allowed Margaret Meynell to reside within Clementhorpe nunnery for a year subject to her good behaviour (Reg. Greenfield 2, 225). For both good and ill, the lives of the nuns of Clementhorpe seem to have been closely linked with those of the secular inhabitants of York. At the time of the notorious visitations of the English monasteries by Drs Layton and Legh in 1536, it was still being alleged that pilgrims visited Clementhorpe Priory to venerate the milk of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the custody of the nuns (VCH 3, 130).
The History of Clementhorpe Nunnery

The Estates and Economy of Clementhorpe Nunnery

Thanks to the original endowments the priory had received from Archbishop Thurstan and its other early benefactors, the nunnery of Clementhorpe was unusual among smaller Yorkshire religious houses in possessing estates fairly widely scattered across the north of England (Fig. 5). However, these estates were never positively abundant. Like monasteries throughout the country Clementhorpe received by far the greatest number of gifts of lands and services within the first two centuries after its foundation in c. 1130. Some landed property continued to be alienated to the nunnery after the Statute of Mortmain in 1279, but only a handful of grants of land were made to the nuns of Clementhorpe in the period following the Black Death of 1349–50. Like so many English religious houses it seems probable that Clementhorpe Priory reached its highest point of economic prosperity during the course of the 13th century and was thereafter often confronted with the problems caused by a declining annual income. The poverty of the nunnery was, of course, only relative; its estimated annual value on the eve of the Dissolution (£68 11s. 8d.) still ensured it a place as the third wealthiest of the 22 Yorkshire houses of nuns (Burton, 1979, 45). Nevertheless, as early as 1317 the records of a visitation by Archbishop Melton refer to the insolvency of Clementhorpe (VCH 3, 129). Over a century later, in 1442, Pope Eugenius IV granted an indulgence to those who gave alms towards the repair of the nunnery; and in 1452 the bishop of Bangor issued a similar indulgence to facilitate repairs which the nuns were allegedly too poor to undertake themselves (Bod. L Dodsworth E7,1, fo 39; 8, fo 110v; Cal. Papal Letters 1431–47, 256). One can probably assume that during most of the later medieval centuries the balance of income against expenditure at Clementhorpe was only narrowly maintained.

The single greatest concentration of the nunnery’s estates was, as might be expected, in the area immediately surrounding the precincts within the suburb of Clementhorpe itself. Archbishop Thurstan’s initial endowment had provided the nuns with the necessary land for their conventual buildings. This was extended in the late 12th century by Gilbert of Huddleston’s gift of meadowland below the nunnery as the site for a guest house, and again in the mid 13th century by Peter de Percy’s grant of land and buildings opposite the nunnery gate to the north (Dugdale 4, 326). Within the city, the nunnery also acquired possession of lands and rents in many quarters: in Aldwark, Monkgate, Walmgate, Bishophill, Stonegate, Chetmangate or Ketmongergate (St Andrewgate), Hertergate (Friargate), and Blake Street. An interesting feature of the grant made in 1356 by John Goteland, chaplain and guardian of a chantry in the church of St Peter the Little, of an 8s. annual rent from his two shops in York is the mention of solars above each of these and the precise description of their location in Stonegate (Cal. Pat. 1354–58, 461). One may assume that from an early period many of the nunnery’s urban properties were leased, the obvious advantage being a provision of ready cash at fixed dates.

In the environs of York, the nunnery possessed lands and rents in Bootham, Middlethorpe, Bishopthorpe and Layerthorpe. Further afield the majority of the nunnery’s estates were clustered on the lowlands to the south-west, in the fertile Vale of York and within a 25 mile radius of the city. Some endowments were at a greater distance; Long Preston and Horton-in-Ribblesdale were over 50 miles away, while most distant of all was the priory’s land at Southwell, Nottinghamshire, some 60 miles to the south.
Generally, the gifts of land were small: meadowland in the city, an acre in the suburbs, plots of land and pasture rights elsewhere. However, there were several less conventional endowments. The Close Rolls record grants on two occasions in the 1250s of six oaks for timber from the royal forest of Galtres north of the city, thereby assuring a useful supply of building material for some unknown but presumably major project (Cal. Close 1254–56, 140; cf. Cal. Close 1279–88, 32). In 1305 Clementhorpe gained the right to receive in mortmain two plots of land on Inglemoor, south of the Yorkshire Ouse, by a grant of Henry de Lacy: as a result of a 12th century concession from Agnes Tunderlane, it had already gained rights of ‘turbary’, i.e. the rent from 20,000 turves, near Swineflect on the Ouse (Cal. Pat. 1301–7, 321; Bod. L Dodsworth E7, 8, fo 110). On several occasions the nunnery was also given rents from houses and shops within the city of York itself (YML, Vi 9, 57).

Another valuable addition to the estate of the nuns was made in the 13th century when Alice Staveley, a widow, presented the nunnery with the advowson of the parish church of Horton-in-Ribblesdale. The church was attached to the two bovates of land which Alice’s father, Adam, had previously given to the nunnery (Bod. L Dodsworth E7, 8, fo 111). This gift is undated, but as it was witnessed by the dean of York, Walter of Kirkham, it must relate to the latter’s period of office, i.e. 1242–50. The church was appropriated to the nunnery by Archbishop Walter de Gray in 1249, a pension being reserved to the church of Giggleswick (Reg. Walter de Gray, 107). Even at that date, Clementhorpe was allegedly not a wealthy nunnery, as the archbishop’s register records that the appropriation was made ‘in the realisation of their poverty and need’. The gift was further confirmed in a royal charter of 1327 (Cal. Charter Rolls 1327–41, 26). In 1269, the archbishop of York, Walter Giffard, had appropriated to the nunnery its second church, that of St Andrew, Bishopthorpe. By this appropriation, the nuns received the revenues from the parish in return for paying the vicar a suitable stipend. The nunnery also had to bear the archbishop’s and archdeacon’s charges as well as the expenses of books and ornaments. The vicar was allowed the altarage and also two marks each year and a meal on Sundays at the nunnery. He was also to repair the chancel unless a new one was built with aid from the nunnery, and was assigned a house and garden (Cal. Charter Rolls 1257–1300, 91; Reg. Giffard, 59–60).

Despite the fame of its founder, Archbishop Thurstan, Clementhorpe generally received its endowments from individuals drawn from the middle ranks of society, from those below baronial rank. Such a pattern of benefaction influenced the situation and economic management of its estates, as it resulted in small, scattered endowments with correspondingly low financial yields. Some details are known of the social background of the donors. Thomas Malsours, who granted his lands at Monkhaid to the nunnery in c. 1150–65, was a royal official at York. Approximately a decade later, further gifts from him included eight bovates of land in Grimston and his house there together with one bovate in Milford (EYC 1, no. 1038; Cal. Charter Rolls 1257–1300, 25–6). Another member of the Malsours family, William, possibly the father of Thomas, occurs in the foundation charter. The feudal service of 6s. 8d. which he had paid each year to the archbishop was transferred to the nunnery; he also relinquished to the nuns rights to four measures of land with their buildings at Bishophill, York, for which the nunnery undertook to pay the customary housegable to the king (Bod. L Dodsworth E7, 1, fo 83). In 1221, the prioress Asceline was involved in a dispute with the
son of Thomas Malsours, William, over the land in Grimston which Thomas had previously
granted to the nunnery. In the final settlement, the right of the nunnery to the ten bovates
of land was upheld and the prioress paid seven marks (*Feet of Fines* 1218 to 1231, 40). The
Percy family, which had held extensive estates in Yorkshire from the Norman period, was also
a benefactor of the nunnery. In the mid 13th century, William granted land at Inglemoor,
Robert his son gave them further property there, and Peter Percy, a nephew of William,
granted land by the nunnery gate (Bod. L Dodsworth E7, 1, fo 83; 8, fo 110; cf. YML Vi 9,
57, 58). Another baronial family which figured in benefactions was that of the Lacy's. In the
early 14th century (on 10 March 1305), Henry de Lacy, earl of Lincoln, granted the right to
dig turves on his manor at Inglemoor; and he further restored two plots of moorland there
which he had previously usurped (*Cal. Pat. 1301–7*, 321). Members of the secular clergy do
not figure so prominently in the list of donors. Hugh Murdac, archdeacon of Cleveland, and
the founder of St Andrew’s Priory opposite Clementhorpe, gave the nuns half his land in
Clementhorpe which lay between the nunnery gardens and the Ouse (Bod. L Dodsworth
E7, 1, fo 82). In 1356, John Goteland, chaplain, gave the nunnery 8s. rent each year from
his two shops in the city (p. 17, above). Some bequests inevitably led to litigation. In 1300,
the prioress was involved in an assize of Novel Disseisin with Jervaulx Abbey concerning
pasture rights in Horton-in-Ribblesdale (Baldon, 1895, 96).

As a rule, the nunnery received its gifts in free and perpetual alms, but in some cases it
was put under an obligation to render either a service or a rent as part of the agreement. For
example, for the grant of Monkheid in c. 1150–65, Clementhorpe was obliged to pay the
grantor Thomas Malsours 7 marks and his daughter 5s. Often there was a practical motive
behind the benefaction. This is exemplified in the case of Nicholas Poteman who in 1284
gave two messuages in York, as well as a toft, croft and three quarters of a bovate in Thorpe
Maltby in exchange for a corrody. The nuns, for their part, had to pay Poteman 2s. and
provide a relative of his with a pair of gloves (Bod. L Dodsworth E7,1, fos 36–7). Similarly,
by the gift of the chaplain Bartholomew in c. 1268 of a message in Clementhorpe, the
nunnery was to render 3s. each year, a pair of white gloves to Juliana, the previous holder of the
messuage, and two hens to the archbishop at Christmas (Bod. L Dodsworth E7,1, fos 37–8). In
1286 4d. and a goose were annual charges (to the Fairfax family) of land acquired by the nuns
in the suburbs of York: this same toft and an acre owed 20d. for secular services to the prior and
convent of Holy Trinity York (*YI* 2, 53).

The close proximity of the nunnery to the Ouse made it convenient for the convent to
have a staithes (landing place) bordering the river. The 18th century historian, Francis Drake,
records that ‘In making the works for rendering the River Ouse more navigable (circa 1730)
a large foundation of ashlar stone was dug out of the banks, which had probably been a key
or staithes, belonging to this nunnery. These stones, being often seen at low water, have been
mistaken for the foundations of a bridge here; which the ground on the other side gives no
such testimony of. The precise situation of the staithes was alleged by Knight to have been on
the site of the old Co-operative Society’s Coal Wharf (Drake, 1736, 249; cf. Knight, 1944,
527). A staithes here would have been most convenient for receiving supplies when other
means of transport were more difficult. Other religious institutions on the waterfront at York
often had their own staithes.
The nunnery also owned meadowland south of its precincts and flanking the Ouse which was known as ‘Little Ing’. It is mentioned in 1375 in the grant by John de Skelton of a messuage which extended from the high street of Clementhorpe at the front (north of the nunnery), to the meadow of the convent called ‘le Lytteleng at the back (south of the nunnery) (YCA Lib. B/Y, fo 5; YMB, 3, 9). What was possibly a second ‘Ing’ or meadow was also owned by the nunnery, with the unsurprising name of ‘N tin I tig’. A lease of 1389 to Robert de Beverley, a York butcher, describes his lands as extending in length from the king’s high street in front to the meadow called the ‘Nune Enges’ (YCA House Book B1, fo 47). In the late 16th century, John Clymt, porter, was presented at Micklegate Wardmote Court for the crime of ‘cutting and carrying away of Ouse bank at the Nunynges side to the great nuisance’ (YCA E31, 1, iv). According to Drake (1736, 247) the meadow by the nunnery which Gilbert of Huddleston granted in the 12th century was, in the 18th century, called ‘Nun-ings’. Lund’s map of York (YCA D/V v), made in 1772, but with details taken from a plan by Kershaw of 1719, also shows a long strip of land bordering the river called ‘Nunn Ings Common’ whose south-west corner abutted the precinct boundary (Pl. I). The city boundary lists of the early 19th century also mention a Nun Ing and a Nunfield, through which the southern boundary of the city passed (Raine, 1955, 315). The Nonne or Nun Fields (often known as York Fields) figure prominently in leases of pasture in the area from Elizabeth’s reign onwards (YCA Deeds, 1375/3, nos. 309, 397, 428).

Although scattered references to tenements held by the nuns of Clementhorpe in York and Yorkshire survive in records as diverse as royal plea rolls, inquisitions ad quod damnum and the account rolls of the York mercers, it is only with six post-Dissolution collectors’ accounts spanning the period 1535–12 that there is a wealth of information concerning the nunnery’s administration and finances (PRO SC/6 4466 (1535-36); 4467 (1536-37); 4468 (1537-38); 4469 (1538-39); 4470 (1539-40); 4524 (1541-42)). In these accounts the nunnery properties are located and described in detail so that they may be compared with the possessions which were acquired during the early Middle Ages. The nunnery owned several properties in Clementhorpe, as would be expected, but the rents from these tenements and cottages as well as gardens, closes and fish garths by no means formed the largest source of income. The rents from other tenements in York leased to free tenants and tenants-at-will were widely scattered throughout the city. They included properties in St Saviourgate, Fossgate, Micklegate (within and without the Bar), St Denys’ Cemetery, Walmgate, and without Walmgate Bar, Monkgate, Davygate, Bootham and other unspecified areas of the city. The nunnery owned two fish garths, one of which was in Clementhorpe itself.

Outside York, the position at the Dissolution is basically the same as in the earlier period. The nunnery’s properties comprised tenements with their appurtenances, cottages and closes in Healaugh, Middlethorpe, Dringhouses, Grimston, Stutton, Sherburn-in-Elmet, Barkston, Saxton, Ferrybridge, Otley, Alderston and Goole, together with the manors of Acaster Malbis, Middlethorpe and Monkhay. The capital lands of the nunnery were not however extensive, comprising no more than 86 acres of arable, pasture and meadow in the form of flats and closes, at a total rent of a little over £6 per annum. Much the largest single source of income was the rents of properties let to tenants-at-will, amounting to over £30 per annum. The next largest category of revenue was that derived from spiritualities, including tithes and
meadows, closes and gardens in the city and suburbs, the tithe from a windmill next to a chapel at Bishopthorpe, with the personal tithes and oblations from this chapel, a water mill at Otley, the income from the manor of Bigcroft at Horton-in-Ribblesdale, together with the tithes and alms from the church there. As in the case of other monastic institutions, this source formed at least one quarter of the total revenue, amounting to £16 per annum. Other income was derived from various rents of tenants in the city and suburbs which produced £5 or more, the rents of free tenants which amounted to £3, and finally the rent from the leases of three windmills in Clementhorpe which totalled £2 7s. 4d. According to the post-Dissolution accounts, the total income realized an average annual sum of £65.

Clementhorpe Nunnery and Medieval York

Clementhorpe was one of a number of extra-mural suburbs which clustered around York in the early Norman period and probably had, as has been shown, pre-Conquest origins. It survived throughout the later Middle Ages as an extra-urban village of some size and significance. Indeed the importance of the suburb must have been due in no small measure to the existence of a monastic establishment in its midst. Its situation outside the city walls had an attractive position overlooking the river, possibly making it a favoured residential area. The inhabitants were apparently employed in small-scale farming and trade, and it is likely that gardens, orchards, meadows, and small arable and pasture closes occupied the area rather than large open fields, which the city’s limited amount of extra-mural land could in any case probably not support. Surviving post-medieval leases (YCA Deeds, 1375/3) and John Lund’s map of 1772 (YCA D/V v), for example, all show that land of this type continued to dominate the site into the post-medieval period. The fortunes of the suburb and nunnery were inevitably closely linked, and the local inhabitants used the church for parochial worship. It is not surprising that after the dissolution of the nunnery in 1536 the suburb apparently declined in importance until it was redeveloped in the early 19th century.

However, references to the suburb in medieval property deeds show a considerable amount of development taking place there from the 12th century onwards. Thus a grant dated 1140–56 records that Robert, the warden of the hospital of St Peter, York, gave to William, son of Quenilda, land in Clementhorpe for 16d. yearly and two hens at Christmas. This property had previously been given to the hospital by Gilbert, son of Nigel of Huddleston, (EYC 1, no. 215, p. 179). The Huddleston family were evidently local landowners of some prestige in the suburb. Gilbert of Huddleston’s grant of meadowland to the nunnery in the mid 12th century has already been noted (p. 20); between 1165 and 1174 he further restored to the church of York and to Archbishop Roger of Pont l’Evêque his other rights in Clementhorpe, stating that he and his ancestors had unjustly held these and other lands and that this grant now represented penance for the crime (EYC 1, no. 39, p. 47; cf. Harvey, 1965, 392). A few years later, Richard, another member of the Huddleston family, let to a certain Avenel and his heirs his chief dwelling place in Clementhorpe for 2s. per annum (EYC 1, no. 216, p.180). The deed, dated 1175–89, is interesting for its detailed description of the property. In the event of war, the tenant was obliged to surrender the house and chamber to Richard, but was
allowed to occupy any other houses in the court (curia) with access to the water through the middle of the house. The mansion in question was obviously quite substantial, possibly that of a merchant in view of its proximity to the Ouse. The property might be best interpreted as a major dwelling house overlooking the river, backed by a courtyard containing the other domos mentioned, possibly warehouses and stables, and giving access to a street (Stacpoole, 1972, 258). The cartulary of Nostell Priory records a grant by Hugh the chaplain, son of Duuegald (?Duningald), of two tofts in the street called ‘Clementesthorpe’. A city rental of 25 January 1377 also records that William of Cawood paid 2s. for a property in Clementhorpe (YMB 1, 3). At about the same date one of the holders of a tenement there, originally given by Richard Basy, was Anabelle de Holme (YMB 1, 26). Surviving late 13th century property deeds of the Vicars Choral of York Minster also reveal that the nuns of Clementhorpe had acquired other holdings and rents from houses cum curia in cotes de Clementhorpe as well as elsewhere within and outside the city (YML Vi 9, 57, 58).

Three late 14th century wills also mention property at Clementhorpe: in the 1390s John Isabel, a York cook, had a garden and two burgages; William Fyssh, a local merchant, had a messuage; and John Sheffield, skinner, two gardens (Raine, 1955, 316–7). There was also, it appears, a small chapel close to the nunnery in the 15th century. A papal letter of 1426 licensed the consecration of a chapel built by two York citizens, Robert Courtoys and William Godinogh, at their own expense, ‘by the Benedictine nuns’ priory of Clementhorpe’ (Cal. Papal Letters 1417–31, 470). The nunnery also exerted an influence on local place-names and street-names in the neighbourhood. The nunnery meadowland called ‘Nun Ing’ has been referred to above. In 1408, the ‘Nun Lane’ was said to be near the river, while a certain William de Sallay also had lands on the corner of Nun Lane. A large tract of land to the south of the dissolved priory continued to be named ‘Nonne Fields’ in the Elizabethan period and later (YCA Deeds, 1375/3, 266). The 19th century city boundary surveys of York still mention a ‘Nunfield’ in the same area (Palliser, 1978, 13; Raine, 1955, 315, 317).

Several of the inhabitants of late medieval York were brought into close relationship with the nuns of Clementhorpe because the conventual church also served as their parish church. The ecclesia sancti Clementis was certainly one of the least wealthy of the medieval churches of York; from the 14th century onwards it was usually associated for taxation purposes with St Mary Bishophill Senior, the church with which it was to be eventually united. At the time of a national parish subsidy of 1427 the church of St Clement was valued at only 20s. per annum; and in 1445–46 it contributed only 6s. 8d. when the civic authorities made a special levy to meet the costs of expensive litigation against St Mary’s Abbey (YMB 2, 133; York City Chamb. Acc. Rolls, 1396–1500, 51). No doubt the number of parishioners who worshipped at St Clement’s must always have been comparatively small. Nevertheless in July 1464 it was complained that the celebration of the feast of St William in York Minster had the unfortunate effect of removing its congregation from the nunnery church, and leaving it quasi desolatam, on the very day that the annual festival of St Clement was held there. Archbishop William Booth accordingly transferred the date of the annual festival of St Clement to the Sunday following the feast of St Peter and Paul (BI Reg. Booth 20, fo 222).

However, it is from the wills and testaments preserved in the probate registers now at the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research at York that one can derive much the most vivid
impression of what place the church and nunnery of Clementhorpe held in the affections of the inhabitants of York and its region. (References to the wills of testators now identified as making bequests to the nunnery will be found on p. 24.) Many of the recorded bequests to the nunnery, at their most numerous in the 15th century, were naturally from members of the Yorkshire gentry like Sir John Scrope, Sir Alexander Neville, Sir John Depeden and the widows of Sir John Stapleton and Sir Robert Bruce. The nuns of Clementhorpe were also often remembered in the wills of the canons of 15th century York Minster (John Barningham, Thomas Pereson, William Duffield) as well as those of members of the parish clergy. Most bequests to Clementhorpe however were made by the lay inhabitants of York itself. They ranged from prominent mayors of the city, like Richard Russell, John de Gysburne and Thomas de Holme, to wealthy ladies like Elizabeth Medlay, Isabel Bruce and Elizabeth Delaryver (see above, p. 12) whose designation as ‘of the house of Clementhorpe’ can leave little doubt that they actually resided in the nunnery precincts.

The choice of burial place is often stated with detailed precision in these wills, at times throwing light on the construction and design of the nunnery church. Elizabeth Davell, Edmund de Percy, John Corbryg, Agnes Overton and Margaret Stapilton all expressed a desire to be buried within the church while William Walles chose the ‘sentuary’. However, several wills pinpoint the burial place more exactly, and, in addition, give details of the images and altars within the church. Three testators desired burial before the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary — Elizabeth Delaryver, Joan del Skergell and John Acom; from the will of Elizabeth Conyers we learn that this altar was situated in the nuns’ choir. There was also an altar to St Catherine before which Elizabeth Medlay desired burial. The will of Isabel Bruce is especially detailed. She hoped for burial in the cloister of the nunnery near the grave of Joan, her sister, and beneath the images of the Blessed Mary and St William there. Burials found during archaeological investigations seem to reflect the same pattern of interment within the nunnery church, with burials grouped as if within nave, aisles and chapels (p. 6, above).

Most wills naturally also included provision for funeral expenses; Clementhorpe, like other medieval nunneries, was particularly favoured by female testatrixes and especially by those living within its confines. Thus Margaret Stapilton left 13s. 4d. for service wine and bread for the chaplains, nuns, clerics and gentlewomen of Clementhorpe who attended her funeral and 20s. for a breakfast for the entire convent, including the servants, on the day of her burial. Similarly Elizabeth Conyers provided 5 marks for her burial feast. Many and varied were the bequests to the nuns of clothing and other articles: Elizabeth Medlay and Isabel Bruce both bequeathed their best coats to the high altar; Isabel Bruce left six cushions of arras and one benchcover of the same work to serve in the church for covers; and John de Scarborough left to the church an image of the Blessed Virgin that he had previously installed in his room. Other gifts included silver spoons, a bed-cover decorated with garlands and birds, and a chest for church ornaments in the vestry. Elizabeth Conyers was particularly generous in providing the church with a frontal cloth, an altar cloth of two ells (approximately 7ft. 6in. long), a rack and a towel.

Gifts were also frequently made to named individuals, and often by those having close family connections with, or actually residing in, the nunnery. As already noticed, Elizabeth Delaryver bequeathed to her sister Margaret, a nun of Clementhorpe and presumably to be
List of testators making bequests to Clementhorpe Priory

(For references to the copies of these wills in the York Probate Registers at the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, see Index of Wills in the York Registry, 1389 to 1514, (YASRS 6, 1889).

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identified with the woman of that name who was prioress there in 1490, a salt cellar for her life which, after her death, should pass to the convent. Elizabeth Medlay bequeathed a variety of articles: a spoon and a box standing in her room to the prioress, an iron-bound chest to Elizabeth Delaryver, and a cushion and two towels to a nun of the convent. Elizabeth Conyers
bequeathed to the prioree, Isabel Aske, a pair of linen sheds and two cushions, and Isabel Bruce a bronze pot to the prioree, Margaret Delaryver. In 1390 Roger de Moreton had left 4 marks to his daughter, Isabel, a Clementhorpe nun, for the purchase of her habit.

Pecuniary gifts might be made to the entire convent, to its inhabitants, or to named individuals. The sums bequeathed to the convent as a whole might be as much as 15 marks (£10) or as little as half a mark (6s. 8d.). Gifts to the fabric of the church were also frequent. Individual nuns received amounts varying from 12d. each to 20s. for division between them, while the prioree herself usually received a larger amount, varying from 3s. 4d. to 20s. Nor were the parish clerks and chaplains serving the nunnery overlooked. The generosity of the testator often extended to leaving amounts of 12d. to each clerk and 3s. 4d. to the chaplain. Even more illuminating is the information about the iconography of the church to be derived from bequests to images. There were at least three images recorded in the nunnery church: St Osyth or St Sitha, a clothed statue; St Bridget; and a joint image of St Mary and St William. In 1472 Agnes White left to ‘St Sitha my silver beads, to remain there forever’. Roger Tailyour left 7d. for a candle to burn before the image of ‘Blessed Brigid’ in 1505, and, as noted above, Isabel Bruce mentioned the images of St Mary and St William when specifying the place for her burial. Clementhorpe Nunnery was seldom the only religious house to be remembered in the wills of the late medieval inhabitants of York, but it continued to attract no little devotion and attention until the very end.

The Dissolution of Clementhorpe Priory, 1536

When Drs Layton and Legh made their visitation of Clementhorpe Nunnery on 28 February 1536, they reported that two nuns, Cecilia Ward and Joanna Tipping, had already sought release from their religious vows (L and P Henry VIII, 10, 364). That was hardly surprising, for the tumultuous events of the previous six years must already have undermined the confidence of the community established four centuries earlier by Archbishop Thurstan. Once parliament had passed (in March 1536) the act permitting the suppression of all religious houses worth less than £200 a year, all serious hope of the nunnery’s survival must have vanished. For, as Drs Layton and Legh had themselves reported, Clementhorpe enjoyed an annual income of only £50. The essential accuracy of this figure is confirmed not only by an anonymous valuation dating from c. 1507 but also by the detailed survey made by royal commissioners in 1535 which resulted in the famous Valor Ecclesiasticus. At no time were the possessions of the nunnery more meticulously surveyed than at its suppression; and the account of Clementhorpe’s estates provided by the Valor can be combined with the very similar record of its income and expenditure to be found in the immediate post-Dissolution accounts to provide a detailed impression of the revenues and outgoings of the convent (Valor Ecclesiasticus, 5, 2; cf. PRO SC/6 4466–70, 4524).

Within Clementhorpe itself the nuns possessed — according to the Valor — not only their own site and gardens, but also two windmills, valued at 24s. and 20s. respectively. The nunnery precinct, together with the windmills and the rent from two cottages in Clementhorpe, realized an annual income of £6 14s. Much more valuable were the lands
and tenements held by the priory in the city and suburbs of York and leased to free tenants and tenants-at-will. The nuns still derived income from other properties at Middlethorpe, Dringhouses, Grimston, Healaugh, Sherburn, Monkhay, Barkston, Saxton, Ferrybridge, Otley, Goole and Alderton. In addition to its income from these temporalities (estimated at £41 10s. 1d. in the Valor and at £49 5s. lid. in the account for 1536), the priory also received slightly more than £16 from its spiritual possessions, of which much the most valuable were the tithes from its appropriated church of Horton-in-Ribbesdale. The nunnery’s total gross annual income was accordingly calculated at £57 7s. 9d. in the Valor, £8 less than what seems to have been collected in the year from Michaelmas 1536 to Michaelmas 1537 (PRO SC/6 4466). Like every English nunnery north of Godstow and Elstow, the priory of Clementhorpe enjoyed an income well below the critical figure of £200 per annum and was doomed to immediate extinction.

On 13 June 1536 Clementhorpe was accordingly visited by royal commissioners entrusted with the so-called ‘supervision’ of the priory, and it must have been on this occasion that the nuns were asked whether they wished to abandon their order or transfer to a larger convent. Although the detailed inventory of the goods of the house made by the commissioners has not survived, most of the relevant information appears on the account compiled by the royal receiver later that year (PRO SC/6 4466; 4641, memb. 3). The nunnery’s collection of plate, not in fact particularly valuable, included a silver parcel-gilt chalice (12oz), a silver parcel-gilt cup (5oz), two necklaces adorned with ‘owches’ of parcel-gilt (6oz) and three glasses with relics enclosed in silver. Also confiscated by the crown were the lead on the roof of the nunnery church as well as other houses within the precinct, three small bells hanging in the belfry and the residue of grain still in the nuns’ granary. The individual responsible for the sale of all these goods was of course Leonard Beckwith, appointed the first Yorkshire receiver of the newly created Court of Augmentations in April 1536. Suppression was to follow ‘supervision’ with considerable rapidity. On 31 August 1536, within a few weeks of the dissolution of eight other Yorkshire nunneries, the priory of Clementhorpe was formally suppressed for ever. In the previous month (on 13 July) William Maunsell, gentleman, of Huntington, clerk of York castle and of the Yorkshire county court, as well as a friend of the influential Sir George Lawson, had already become the first lessee of the nunnery site (PRO E315, 209, fo 71v; SC/6 4641, memb. 3, 17).

To the apparently remorseless course of the dissolution of the monasteries there was however to be one major, if very temporary, setback, the Pilgrimage of Grace. By the time that the main company of the Pilgrims, led by Robert Aske, entered the city on 16 October 1536, the commons of York had already risen in sympathy with their objectives; these included the proclamation that ‘the religious persons should enter into their houses again’, and according to Wilfred Holme, a local manorial lord hostile to the rebellion, the monks and nuns recently ejected from the religious houses in York and its region did indeed re-occupy their monasteries and convents. ‘To the Abbey suppressed the people they restaurate, rudent incessantly, with clamour excessive’ (L and P Henry VIII, 11, 784 (ii); Dodds and Dodds, 1915, 168–91; Dickens, 1959, 114–31). At Clementhorpe itself the fragmentary evidence suggests that the nuns were indeed reinstated by the Pilgrims, although probably against the
desire of Isabel Ward, the last prioress. On 11 November 1536, a month before the rebels finally dispersed to their homes, William Maunsell wrote to his friend Sir Arthur Darcy that ‘if every man be commanded to bring in the head governor of the house, I shall sure bring in my prioress’ (L and P Henry VIII, 11, 1047). It may well be that Maunsell remained in titular possession of Clementhorpe during the course of the rebellion but allowed the nuns the necessities of life during their brief return to the convent. That the nunnery was restored in some form is certainly suggested by a reference in the annual account of Clementhorpe for the year 1536–37 to a rent charge of £4 15s. 2d. incurred ‘tempore commocionis’ by the prioress herself (PRO SC/6 4641, membs. 1,17). However after the Pilgrimage collapsed towards the end of 1536, the royal government seems to have encountered no further opposition from the community: the nuns, far from being punished, continued to enjoy their pensions until the end of their lives.

Indeed Prioress Isabel Ward had been granted her own pension by July 1536, a few weeks before the formal suppression of her nunnery. Following her dismissal as head of the house, she is said to have retired to the still surviving house of ‘Jacob’s Well’ in Trinity Lane, where she eventually died in 1569 (PRO E315, 232, fo 20; E201, 76/25 memb. 1v; SC/6 4641, memb. 31; Bowman, 1855,60; RCHMY 3,109). Throughout this long retirement she was in regular receipt of her annual pension of ten marks (£6 13s. 4d.), a payment identical to those received by the ex-prioresses of the Yorkshire nunneries of Basedale, Handale, Rosedale, Sinningthwaite, Thicket and Yedingham, if only half as much as that conferred upon the prioress of Yorkshire’s wealthiest medieval nunnery, the priory of Swine (Bod. L Willis MS 106, fo 127v; cf. Baskerville, 1937, 220; Woodward, 1966, 100). Each of the other eight Clementhorpe nuns to be awarded pensions in 1536 received the customary payment of two marks (£1 6s. 8d.) a year (PRO SC/6 4641, memb. 14v; VCH 3, 130). A surviving pension list of fifteen years later (1551–52) provides the names and ages of the prioress and fifteen other nuns, most of whom were by that date receiving at least £2 a year (VCH 3, 130). Otherwise the last nuns of Clementhorpe leave little or no trace in surviving records.

The holders of corrodies within the nunnery at the time of its suppression shared a somewhat similar fate. Alice Tocottes forfeited her own corrody in return for a compensatory payment of 13s. 4d. per annum for herself and her maidservant, while Edmund Middleton, the last chaplain of the priory, continued to receive an annual sum of £4 for wages and £1 6s. 8d. for food until his death (PRO SC/6 4641, membs. 9v, 14v). The nine servants or conversi employed by the Clementhorpe nuns on the eve of the Dissolution were dismissed with a small gratuity of 9s. 2d. (PRO SC/6 4641, memb. 14v; cf. VCH 3, 130). Like the majority of Yorkshire nunneries for which information survives in the post-Dissolution receivers’ accounts, Clementhorpe Priory had apparently contained rather more servants than it did nuns. This had probably always been the case, and not the least important consequence of the suppression of the religious houses for the inhabitants of York was the abrupt curtailment of much employment within the city. Although the conventual church and buildings at Clementhorpe seem to have been plundered and devastated a good deal less rapidly than were most of York’s other religious houses, and especially its friaries, there can be little doubt that their decay and dilapidation soon followed.
Clementhorpe Nunnery after the Dissolution

Immediately after their suppression the religious houses of York usually passed to members of the county gentry, but sooner or later most of the sites came into the hands of local citizens. Such a development occurred rapidly at Clementhorpe itself. William Maunsell of Huntington first leased the precincts of Clementhorpe Nunnery as early as 13 July 1536, and even before that date he had been a tenant of the priory who had rented a fish garth from the nuns for 13s. 4d. per annum (PRO E315, 209, fo 71v; SC/6 4641 membs. 3, 17; SC/6 4466). He almost certainly proceeded to make the nunnery site his chief residence, perhaps re-using the conventual buildings, some of whose ruins remained above the ground until the 18th century (see p. 30). In 1539 he was serving as a constable of St Clement’s parish when a military muster had to be raised there (L and P Henry VIII, 14, 307). The formal enrolment of Maunsell’s lease of the site is of especial value in providing a detailed description of the nunnery precinct and its appurtenances. Apart from its buildings, dovecots, gardens and orchards, the nunnery was said to have demesne lands comprising arable, pasture and meadow as well as tithes of hay and common pasture for a bull and twenty cows on the Knavesmire. Maunsell’s lease was to run for a term of 21 years and to involve him in an annual rent of exactly £7. He was also charged with the customary duties of maintenance of the property, but otherwise seems to have enjoyed free disposal of his new acquisition. He was given the traditional rights of ‘hedgebote’ (the taking of wood to make or repair hedges), ‘Tyerbote’ (the gathering of wood for fuel), ‘ploughbote’ and ‘cartebote’ (the taking of wood to repair ploughs and carts respectively) (PRO E315, 209, fo 71v).

William Maunsell was not however to enjoy the profits of Clementhorpe Priory for long; after his death in 1541 the site passed to Edward Skipwith, apparently a local York lawyer. The enrolment of Skipwith’s grant made on 18 April 1542 provides details identical to those found in Maunsell’s earlier lease, together with the addition of the fish garth in Clementhorpe, previously rented by Maunsell, as well as a messuage in Middlethorpe. The annual value of the entire property was now set at £8 15s. (L and P Henry VIII, 17, 283 (52)). However, Skipwith’s tenure was also to be extremely short-lived. In the same year, a fine conveyed legal title to Sir Arthur Darcy and Mary his wife of the house and site of the late priory of Clementhorpe and six messuages and six cottages (Feet of Fines 1, 103), with lands and free fishing in Clementhorpe, Bishopthorpe, Knavesmire, Bustardthorpe and Middlethorpe. This grant was formally enrolled on 1 May 1542 (L and P Henry VIII, 17, 362 (4)). The brevity of Skipwith’s tenure — less than a month—must remain a mystery. Bearing in mind the friendship between Maunsell and Darcy, it is possible that the latter had originally intended to take over the property on the death of Maunsell, but was pre-empted by Skipwith. The two may then have come to an agreement whereby Skipwith conceded the property to Darcy for a profitable fee.

Nor did Darcy remain long in possession. A fine of 1543 records the conveyance to Richard Goldthorpe and his wife Joanna of “The house and site of the priory of Clementhorpe and six messuages and six cottages and a windmill with lands, free fishing and a tannery as well as lands in Bishopthorpe, Knavesmire, Bustardthorpe, and Middlethorpe, and a messuage with lands and free fishing in Sand Hoton and Sand Hoton Carr”. His agreement was enrolled
on 2 May 1543 (L and P Henry VIII, 18, pt 1, 360; cf. VCHY, 160). The mention of the
tannery is the first reference to such a development on the Clementhorpe site. The properties
in Sand Hutton were probably recent additions to the Darcy estate, (ioldthorpe was a local
York haberdasher and alderman, who also acquired St Andrew’s Priory across the river from
Clementhorpe. He died in 1560. The Goldthorpe family held the site longer than any of
the other occupants it has been possible to trace. On the death of Richard (ioldthorpe the
site passed to Thomas Goldthorpe, his brother, and thence in 1573 to Peter (ioldthorpe,
a London merchant and son of Richard (Cal. Pat. 1572–75, pt 1, 2). In 1598, Richard
Goldthorpe, the younger son, even extended the property by the addition of messuages in
Clementhorpe, Fishergate and Middletonorpe, shared with two other citizens (Feet of Fines
4, 104). Apart from the details of lordship, however, little is known of the fate of the site
during this period: parts of it, at least, were used as a town house by the Goldthorpe family
(Paliser, 1971, 15; 1979, 237). In 1599, Clementhorpe passed to two prominent York
merchants, Lawrence Wade and George Rosse, together with the site of the former priory of
St Andrew (Feet of Fines 4, 126; cf. York Mercers, 260). By that date Elizabethan poor relief
assessments make it very clear that the number of householders on the Clementhorpe site was
comparatively small (YCR 7, 13, 65).

The patent rolls and other crown and civic records of the 16th century are naturally replete
with references to the fate that befell the various properties once held within and without the
city by the nuns of Clementhorpe. In 1566, for example, two Londoners acquired a tenement
in Micklegate together with other lands once part of the endowments of the nunnery (Cal.
Pat. 1563–66, pt 8, 476). Particularly well documented are the post-Dissolution histories
of the windmills once belonging to the priory, some of which continued to be a prominent
feature of the York landscape for centuries to come. The best known (according to Angelo
Raine probably the mill whose mound once stood in the grounds of Mill Mount School)
had been built by Alexander Plumpton early in the 16th century to the west of the nunnery
and east of St James’s Chapel on the Mount. It was leased to Thomas Plumpton by Prioress
Isabel Ward in 1524 and later passed to the Helme family; the validity of the prioress’s lease
became a major source of controversy in a highly acrimonious legal dispute between Edward
Helme and the city corporation of York in the late 1580s (PRO SC/6 4466; YCA E76, fo
12; G 47/1; House Book 29, fos 233, 238v-239; YCR 8, 135-6; VCHY, 507; Raine, 1955,
309-10). A second windmill once owned by the nunnery lay to the south of the convent
and can be identified with the ‘Nun Mill’ situated between the modern Nunthorpe Crescent and
Nunthorpe Grove; in the receiver’s account of 1538–40 it was described as derelict after being
blown down by the wind, but its history, and that of subsequent mills on the site, can be
traced to 1885 when the last mill there was finally demolished (YCA E76, fo 12; Raine, 1955,
309–10). A third windmill in the possession of Clementhorpe Priory at its dissolution (PRO
SC/6 4466) seems to have been located in the angle of the present Holgate and Tadcaster
Roads. The high ground immediately to the west of the nunnery precinct was obviously one
of the most suitable locales for windmills in medieval and post-medieval York.

Much less useful to the inhabitants of York in post-Reformation conditions than the
nunnery windmills was the conventual and parish church of St Clement itself. This venerable
priory church was, hardly surprisingly, one of the fifteen parish churches of York whose
suppression was recommended in the act of 1547 ‘for the uniting of certaine churches within the City of York’ (YCR 4, 168–9, 179; Palliser, 1974, 91, 96; 1979, 51). On 27 July of the following year the corporation agreed to the sale of St Clement’s, and it was decided that it might be sold for 40s. to Richard Goldthorpe, then the lessee of the nunnery precinct (YCR 4, 179). Thereafter ‘the parish church and parish of the Blessed Mary in Oldbishophill was united with the parish church of St Clement’s outside Skeldergate postern’ (YCA G/7; YCR 5, 5). Precisely when the fabric of the church was demolished remains uncertain: it appears on James Archer’s plan of c. 1673 like other churches then in use. As noted above, substantial traces of some of the conventual buildings did however survive, perhaps re-used as a dwelling (see p. 28, above). Drawings made in the 18th and 19th centuries are discussed below (p.31 ff.) by David Stocker, who suggests that these remains represent part of the south claustral range. The excavation, perhaps on the site of the church itself, showed that the ground had been disturbed and most of the structural features destroyed.

For early historians of York, writing in the 16th to 18th centuries, the ruined nunnery was the only monument of any note in the suburb of Clementhorpe. It was mentioned first by Leland in his brief description of the city shortly after the nunnery’s dissolution in 1536 and again, a century later, by Sir Thomas Widdrington who briefly outlined the history of the nunnery (Toulmin Smith, 1907, 56; Caine, 1897, 126–7). By the early 18th century the historian Drake wrote of Clementhorpe that ‘here there was a considerable village formerly; but now, except the miserable ruin of the church, there are not above two houses’ (Drake, 1736, 248–9).

Eighty years later these houses still survived, but no new buildings had yet appeared on the site (Hargrove, 1818, 499). From the 16th to the early 19th centuries Clementhorpe appears therefore to have been a sparsely populated and largely undeveloped suburb. The excavation of the nunnery revealed a series of lime kilns on the site (p. 6, above) in the post-Reformation period, and Lund’s 18th century map (Pl. I) shows largely agricultural land enclosed in small fields or closes (YCA D/V v). From at least the mid 17th century until 1762 the site of Clementhorpe Nunnery was owned by members of the Fairfax family, and was sold to George Perrot, a wealthy local landowner and prominent York citizen, in 1762. It was known by two names: Pond Close and Clementhorpe Close, and was generally described as meadow or pasture (YCA Deeds 1375/3; YCA Acc. 209). Little else is known about the use to which it was put, except that for some years in the early 18th century its tenant was a wine merchant and it could conceivably have been used as pasture for dray horses. Other documentary evidence for the area in this period is not in fact extensive, but an intriguing reference in 1645 to a proposal to build plague lodges in Clementhorpe again suggests that this was an undeveloped locality isolated from the main centres of population in York (YCA B36 fo 156v; Raine, 1955, 317, wrongly cites the date as 1604). In 1745 the already ‘miserable ruin of the church’ was to be even more seriously exposed by the proposed removal of stone from a section of the nunnery’s walls, 85ft long and 9ft high, for the repair of the city’s walls (Caine, 1897, 127 n.). Redevelopment, at first on a very small scale, only began in 1822; but by 1850 three recently built houses in Clementhorpe (then called St Clement’s Place) were already occupied and proved a portent of the development of late Victorian suburban housing over the whole area. It remains officially designated as ‘an area of high density tenement housing developed between 1850 and 1900’ (Phillips, 1975, 1).
Memories of the nunnery were then still sufficiently alive to influence the naming of new streets in this section of York. Apart from the dedication to St Clement of a Victorian church in Scarcroft Road in 1871, the nuns of Clementhorpe are today commemorated by little but the names of Clement Street, St Clement’s Grove, Nunnery Lane, Nun Mill Street, Nunthorpe Avenue, Road, Grove and Crescent and Thurstun Court. As so often in the history of the medieval English nunneries, names — even if invented at a much later date — have proved more enduring than buildings.

### Four Views of Clementhorpe Priory

**By D. A. Stocker**

At present only four views of the buildings of Clementhorpe Priory have been identified. The most informative is the sketch by James Poole of c. 1705, which bears the title ‘The South Prospect of Clementhorpe Nunnery and Well from ye Grove Hill’ (Bod. L Tanner MS 300, 11, 132; RCHMY 3, pl. 6; see also Pl. IV). There are also three drawings by George Nicholson; two (Pl. Va, b) with the caption ‘Remains of the Nunnery of St Clement (Clementhorpe) Oct. 25th, 1825’, and the other (Pl. VI) carrying the single word ‘Clementhorpe’ (York City Art Gallery, accession nos. R2171 (49 and 50), R1405). The Ordnance Survey map of 1852 (Fig. 2) shows the remains of an apparently rectangular building lying approximately east-west, near the centre of the presumed priory precinct. These remains were finally removed in 1873 (RCHMY 3, 48). This building is the only convent structure known to have survived later than the 17th century, and must, therefore, have been the subject of both Poole’s and Nicholson’s drawings.

The Poole drawing is taken from the south-west of the building; the Nicholson drawings appear to show both sides of one fragment of wall. The tower of the Debtors’ Prison is visible through a hole in the wall in one of the Nicholson drawings (Pl. VI) and we may presume, therefore, that the wall itself runs east to west. Furthermore, as Plate Va shows a low ruined wall at right-angles to the east to west wall, with a plinth towards the east, we may also presume that the walls shown represent the south-east angle of the building. The third Nicholson drawing (Pl. Vb) shows the east to west wall from the north-west.

Poole’s view shows a rectangular building which, although somewhat overgrown, is in a fairly complete state. The roof is missing but the north, south and west walls are shown standing to almost their original height. The eastern end of the building is difficult to interpret as the line of the east wall is mostly hidden behind the south. Certainly there is no steep gable equivalent to that at the west end, but whether this is owing to damage or because there never was a gable of this type here is not clear.

Architectural detail is not depicted with much care, but a number of features of different types and dates are quite clearly intended. The acute western gable is pierced by four windows. They are shown in a rather haphazard relationship to each other, but the low position of the northernmost may be a perspective error, since a symmetrical arrangement of
three windows, with one light set over two, is a common pattern. A vesica window is also indicated, set between the uppermost window of the trio and the gable ridge. None of the windows in this wall intrudes much below the gable proper and much of the wall beneath is occupied by a large niche containing a statue. The statue is supported by a complicated moulded base, whilst above it rises a large canopy consisting of a steeply pitched gable with crockets and other sculptural details. Underneath the canopy stands a full-length statue. The statue is not clearly drawn, but a standing figure is shown, possibly wearing a long robe and some form of headgear. The figure may be holding both arms forward. It is worth noting that Poole’s drawing of this statue bears little resemblance to the niche statue of the Virgin and Child from the Clementhorpe site which is now in the Yorkshire Museum (RCHMY 3,48, pl. 141). A buttress is sketchily indicated at the south-west corner, with insufficient detail for the type to be assessed.

The south wall is shown as having two registers of windows. Placed low in the wall are two (apparently) round-headed openings, and a rough rectangular hole towards the south-eastern corner probably represents the position of a third window of this type, from which the dressings have disappeared. In the upper parts of the wall two further windows are indicated. At the western end there is a square-headed window with two principal lights under cusped ogee heads, and with three small sub-triangular panels above. At the eastern end of the wall at the upper level is a much less detailed representation of what must be either a single three-light window or, perhaps less likely, three closely grouped but distinct lancets.

A large doorway is indicated in the south wall, somewhat to the east of centre and at ground level. Its two-centred arch is moulded and springs from what may be groups of capitals in the jambs. The jambs themselves may be shafted. At a point about half way between this doorway and the south-west corner there is a second large opening with a semi-circular head and with its sill at a slightly higher level than the heads of the lower register of windows. This opening has the appearance of a doorway; it is both too large, and in an inexplicable position, for a window.

The south-east corner of the building appears to be missing and it is difficult to tell which part of the wall appearing behind the south wall represents the east wall and which the north. That there was an east wall, however, is clear from the 1852 Ordnance Survey map and from the Nicholson drawings. One of the windows indicated in the partially obscured wall may have belonged to the east wall. It is clear that the north wall contained at least six windows placed at a similarly high level to those in the upper register of the south wall.

The three drawings by Nicholson (Pls. Va, b; VI) of what is presumed to be the south-east corner of the building, taken from the north-east, north-west and south-west respectively, add little to our understanding, as by the 1820s there was very little left above ground. Nicholson shows only the eastern end of the south wall standing and that much reduced in height since c. 1705. A small lean-to structure had been built against the south side of the south wall, which obscured some architectural details not shown by Poole, but visible in Nicholson’s drawings of the north side of the wall (Pl. Va, b). They appear to be two lintels associated with minor embrasures. To the west of the lean-to, a rough rectangular opening is shown to have had a semi-circular rere-arch formed by individual voussoirs. This rectangular
opening is probably that shown in this position by Poole (Pl. IV), and, if it is, the Nicholson views provide evidence or its being a third window of the type known from the western end of the wall. Nicholson shows the east wall standing some seven courses high and having a bold, but undecorated, offset at plinth level.

The somewhat equivocal evidence provided by these four drawings makes the architectural history of the building difficult to interpret. It appears to have been a large building of two storeys. The ground floor was entered through the large moulded doorway near the centre of the south wall, and was probably lit by three small loop windows in the south wall. There were apparently no windows at ground floor level in the west wall. The upper floor appears to have been entered by means of the large opening in the south wall west of the ground floor doorway (possibly by means of a wooden stair?). This upper chamber was well lit by the windows in the western gable, the two large windows in the south wall, and the range of windows in the north wall.

With such drawings it is perilous to place any great weight of interpretation on the forms of architectural features depicted, but nevertheless there are, it seems, at least two periods of workmanship represented in this building. Both the arrangement and the type of window shown in the western gable strongly suggest a date in the later 12th or the early 13th century, and such a date may also apply to the windows in the lower part of the south wall. The doorway into the upper floor is shown as round-headed and may therefore also belong to this phase of work.

The large doorway at ground floor level, however, clearly had a two-centred head. This door could belong to the earlier 13th century, and therefore to the first phase, but equally, it could be as late as the later 14th century and thus belong to a subsequent one.

Of the two windows in the upper part of the south wall, only the westernmost is shown in enough detail to allow dating; it may be dated to the early or mid 14th century. The niche in the west wall may also be dated to between the end of the 13th and the middle of the 14th century.

From the above observations, therefore, it seems clear that the one building which survived from the medieval nunnery complex was a large, rectangular, two-storeyed structure lying east and west, which may have been built between c. 1160 and c. 1240 and which was enhanced by the addition of at least one new window and of figure sculpture, between the late 13th and the mid 14th century.

This building has often been described as the priory church, probably first by Drake (1736, 247), but no evidence has ever been produced to support this claim. The building shown in the Poole drawing (Pl. IV), indeed, presents several features which make such an interpretation difficult. The entrances to the building would be unorthodox for a church; there is no west door, and the south door is placed somewhat east of centre. But, more conclusively, the building is apparently two-storeyed; not only are there two zones of windows, but the large opening towards the western end of the south wall is only explicable as a doorway into an upper floor. Examples of conventual churches at first floor level are rare if not unknown in this country, and so it seems unlikely that the building shown by Poole could have been the priory
church. It has been suggested that the Franciscan church at Lincoln was housed on the first floor of the surviving building there, but whatever the original function of the Lincoln building it is most unlikely to have been the conventual church (Stocker, 1984).

The building might, however, have been the south claustral range. Two-storeyed south ranges were quite common in Benedictine houses (for example, Durham, Worcester, Norwich and others). The upper floors usually housed the refectory, which was well provided with windows, especially on the cloister side, as appears to have been the case at Clementhorpe. The lower floors of these buildings were often used for storage, and were often lit, as here, by small loops in the south wall. In most Benedictine houses a major passageway crossed the refectory range from north to south at ground level connecting the main claustral buildings with utilities beyond the garth. Such a role would be appropriate for the moulded south doorway at Clementhorpe.

Although it is impossible to make definite statements about the dates and function of the building from such drawings, its interpretation as part of the south claustral range of the priory fits the known facts more comfortably than its interpretation as a church.

Poole’s drawing also shows in the foreground ‘Clementhorpe Well’ which was described as ‘a spring of clean water’ in 1730 (Gent, 1730, 193). Its position is marked on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map, but it is not certain that it was inside the precinct wall. Even so it may have provided the convent with its water supply.

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Mr David Patrick drew the figures. The summary was translated into French by M B. Randoin and into German by Mrs K. Aberg. The report has been under the editorial supervision of Mrs S. M. Barker.

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Summary

Excavations in 1976–77 by the York Archaeological hunt on a site outside the city walls at Clementhorpe offered the special opportunity to amplify as well as to analyse the meagre documentary records surviving for the history of the priory of Clementhorpe. This priory was the only medieval nunnery in the immediate vicinity of York and the first post Conquest house for women to be established in the whole of Yorkshire.

Founded by Archbishop Thurstan between 1125 and 1133, Clementhorpe Priory played a much neglected but significant role in the lives of the inhabitants of York until its dissolution in 1536. From a detailed study of early medieval cartularies and late medieval York archiepiscopal registers a clear impression emerges of the status of the nunnery’s prioresses, nuns and lay residents as well as its servants. Documentary evidence also shows the widely scattered and varied nature of the medieval estates and economy of the nunnery and the relationships of the inhabitants of the suburb of Clementhorpe with the monastic establishment in their midst. The evidence of wills and property deeds, largely unpublished, throws especially novel light upon benefactions to the priory by the inhabitants of York and its region.

The nunnery’s dissolution in 1536 was an inevitable result of Henry VIII’s suppression of all religious houses worth less than £200 per annum; copious surviving evidence in the Public Record Office details the disposal of the nunnery’s possessions and the pensions awarded to a number of the religious and their servants.

The later history of the nunnery buildings and their occupants and owners is comparatively well documented among the York city and national records (especially royal patent rolls) from the 16th to the 18th centuries. During this period the medieval buildings of the nunnery gradually became more and more dilapidated, and the area around the derelict priory was largely devoted to grazing purposes. By the late 19th century only street-names in the district preserved the memory of the nuns of medieval Clementhorpe.

The excavations, described by D. A. Brinklow, uncovered fragmentary structures and some 250 medieval burials. Exact identification of the features exposed proved difficult because of the massive disturbance of the area in post-medieval times, but the relative position of the burials suggests that they lay within the nunnery church itself. It therefore seems probable that the church lay to the north of where it is located on 19th century maps of York. The excavation report will be published in AY 12.

David Stocker’s supplementary study of the drawings of the buildings of Clementhorpe Priory made by James Poole (c. 1705) and George Nicholson (c. 1825) suggests that the structures there depicted were part of the south claustral range of the nunnery and not, as previously assumed, those of the nunnery church.
Résumé


Fondé par l’archevêque Thurstan entre 1125 et 1133, le prieuré de Clementhorpe a joué jusqu’à sa dissolution en 1536 un rôle significatif, mais dont l’importance a été négligée, dans la vie des habitants de York. L’étude détaillée des cartulaires du début du Moyen-Age et des registres archiépiscopaux de la fin du Moyen-Age à York donne une idée assez claire du statut des prieures, des nonnes et des laïcs du couvent ainsi que des serviteurs. Les sources documentaires montrent également la diversité et la dispersion des propriétés du couvent et de ses activités, ainsi que ses relations des habitants du faubourg de Clementhorpe au sein duquel se trouve l’établissement monastique. Des testaments et actes de propriété, pour une bonne part inédits, apportent un éclairage nouveau sur les donations effectuées par les habitants de York et de sa région au prieuré.

La suppression par Henry VIII de tous les établissements religieux d’un revenu annuel inférieur à 200 livres eut pour effet inéluctable la dissolution du couvent en 1536. Les archives conservent une grande quantité de documents où sont détaillées la disposition des biens du couvent et les rentes allouées à bon nombre des religieuses et de leurs serviteurs.

L’histoire plus récente des bâtiments du couvent et de leurs occupants et propriétaires est plus ou moins bien documentée tant aux archives de la ville de York qu’aux archives nationales (principalement avec les rôles des patentes royales) entre le 16e et le 18e siècle. Pendant cette période les bâtiments médiévaux du couvent sont de plus en plus dégradés et les abords du prieuré abandonné servent principalement de pâture. A la fin du 19e siècle, le souvenir des nonnes du prieuré médiéval de Clementhorpe n’est plus perpétué que par le nom des rues du quartier.

Les fouilles, publiées par D. A. Brinklow, ont découvert des structures fragmentaires et quelques 250 tombes médiévales. L’identification précise des éléments mis au jour s’est avérée délicate en raison d’importants bouleversements de cette zone au début de l’époque moderne, mais l’organisation des sépultures suggère qu’elles ont été pratiquées à l’intérieur même de l’église du couvent. Il semble alors probable que l’église se trouvait au nord de l’endroit où elle est localisée par les plans de York au 19e siècle. Le détail de la fouille sera publié dans *AY* 12.

L’étude entreprise en complément par David Stocker, des dessins des bâtiments du prieuré de Clementhorpe exécuté par James Poole (vers 1705) et par G. Nicholson (vers 1825), montre que les structures représentées sont vraisemblablement une partie de la galerie claustralesdud couvent et non, comme cela était admis, de l’église du couvent.
Zusammenfassung


Die Auflösung des Klosters im Jahre 1536 war eine unvermeidliche Folge der Unterdrückung durch Henry VIII, der alle geistlichen Häuser auflöste, die weniger als £200 im Jahre wert waren; umfangreiche Dokumente, die im Public Record Office erhalten sind, geben genaue Angaben über die Verfügung des Klosterbesitzes und die Pensionen, die einer Anzahl von Nonnen und ihren Bediensteten ausgesetzt wurden.


David Stockers ergänzende Studie der Pläne von den Gebäuden der Priorei Clementhorpe (gezeichnet von James Poole, ca 1705, und George Nicholson, ca 1825) läßt vermuten, daß die abgebildeten Bauwerke Teile der Klosterbauten suden waren, und nicht, wie bisher angenommen, Teile der Klosterkirche.
Abbreviations

Most abbreviations used are those recommended by the Council for British Archaeology but the following are used in addition. Bibliographical brief references used in the text are explained in the bibliography.

AY Archaeology of York
BI Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, University of York
BL British Library
Bod. L Bodleian Library, Oxford
EPNS English Place-Name Society
PRO Public Record Office
SS Surtees Society
YAJ Yorkshire Archaeological Journal
YASRS Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Service
YAT York Archaeological Trust for Excavations and Research
YCA York City Archives
YML D and C York Minster Library Dean and Chapter Archives

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PRO SC/6 4466–4470
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PRO E315 vol 209
PRO E315 vol 232
Oxford, Bod. L Dodsworth MS E7, 1, 8
Bod. L Tanner MS, 300, pt 11
Bod. L. Willis MS, 106
BI Prob. Reg. Probate Registers, 2, 4, 5, 8
YCA Acc. 209
YCA BI House Book, 14
YCA B29 House Book, 1583–87
YCA B36 House Book, 1637–1650
YCA D/V v, Map of Micklegate Ward Stray by John Lund 1772
YCA Deeds, 1375/3, Post-Dissolution Clementhorpe Deeds
YCA E31, Wardmote Court Book, 1485–97
YCA E76, York City Rentals, c. 1600
YCA G7, Deed of Church Union, 1586
YCA G47/1, Lease of Clementhorpe Windmill, 1585
YCA Lib. B/Y, City Memorandum Book
YML D and C. Magnum Registrum Album, 1
YML Vi 9 Vicars Choral Muniments
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**Historical Sources for York Archaeology after AD 1100**


Plate I The Clementhorpe area in 1772. Detail of the plan of Micklegate Ward Stray by John Lund, junior. (Photo: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England))
Plate II  The foundation charter of Clementhorpe Nunnery, 1125–33, BL Cotton Ch. XI, 66. (Reproduced by permission of the British Library)
Plate III Three seals of Clementhorpe Nunnery: (a) and (b) British Library Manuscripts Departments, Seals LXXV 30 and 31, 12th and 13th centuries (reproduced by permission of the British Library); (c) York Minster Library, Vicars Choral Muniments, Vi 9, 13th century (reproduced by permission of York Minster Library). Scale 1:1
Plate IV The Remains of Clementhorpe Nunnery, c. 1705, by James Poole. (Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
Plate V  Two views of the buildings of Clementhorpe in 1825, by George Nicholson. (Reproduced by permission of York City Art Gallery)
Plate VI  A third view, from the south-west, of the buildings of Clementhorpe, by George Nicholson. (Reproduced by permission of York City Art Gallery)