

# CASTLE ACRE PRIORY GCSE HISTORY RESOURCE

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The GCSE History exam will test your knowledge, understanding and analysis of Castle Acre Priory and its relationship with wider events/developments from the Norman period (c.1066–c.1100).

### WHAT YOU'LL BE TESTED ON

In your essay, you'll need to show your understanding of these four aspects:

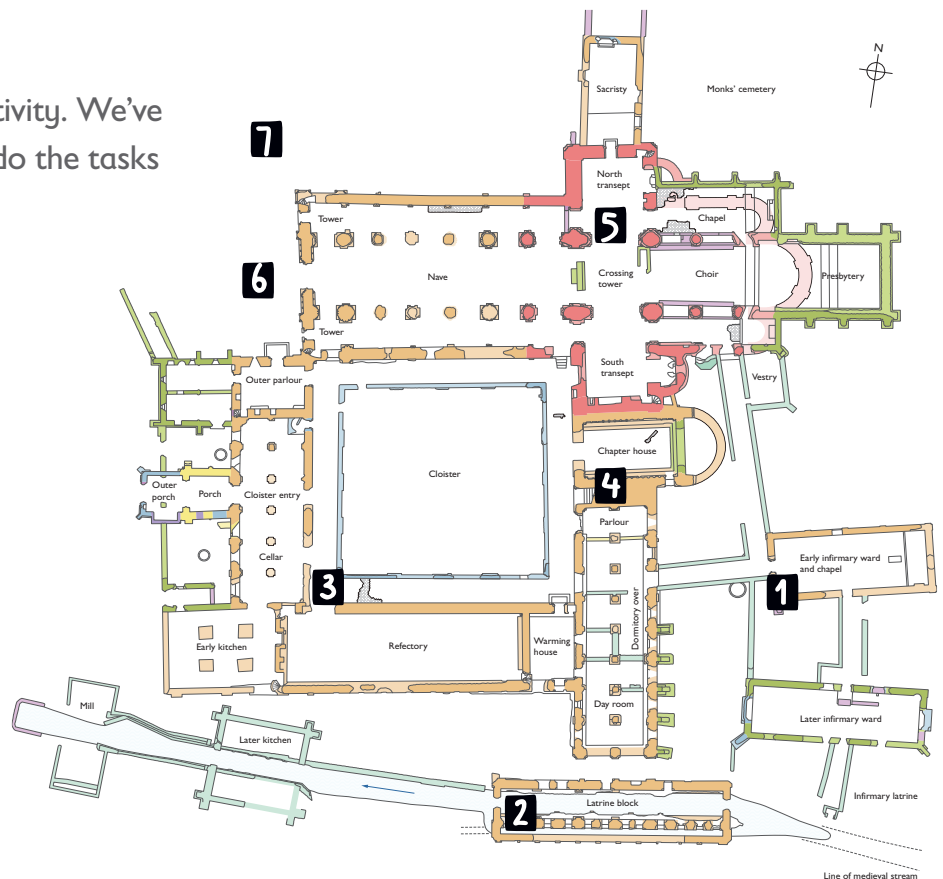
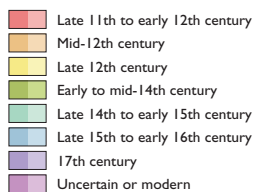
- 1) the location, function and structure of the site
- 2) people connected with the site
- 3) the design and how the design reflects the culture, values and fashions of the people at the time
- 4) how important events/developments from the Norman period are connected to the site.

This resource will help you make the most of your time at Castle Acre Priory. Each activity links to one or more of the four aspects above, so **complete** as many as you can; it's great exam preparation! To continue your learning after your site visit, **read** the 'Research and Revision' section.

## SITE MAP

Use this map to locate each activity. We've suggested a route but you can do the tasks in any order.

CASTLE ACRE PRIORY  
Ground plan



# ACTIVITIES AT THE PRIORY



## 1 INFIRMARY

‘Before and above all things, care must be taken of the sick, that they be served in very truth as Christ is served.’



From *The Rule of St Benedict*, Chapter 43.

**Read** the information below and **underline** key phrases that tell you what it might have been like to visit the infirmary during the medieval period. Then **look** for physical remains of the things described below at Castle Acre Priory:

‘Careful provision was made to look after the physical and spiritual well-being of ill and elderly monks and nuns, either to nurse the individual back to health or to prepare their soul for its final journey to the next world. [...]’



The infirmary consisted of a large stone-built hall, with beds for the sick monks or nuns arranged along the sides at right angles to the wall. A senior monk or nun, called the *infirmarian*, was responsible for the care of individuals (usually called inmates) admitted to the infirmary, where the normal austerities of the monastic life were relaxed. A fire was kept burning to provide warmth. The consumption of meat – normally forbidden – was allowed, and infirmaries had their own kitchens for its preparation. [...] Some conversation was also permitted, but the playing of chess or dice were forbidden in case it caused excitement.

Infirmary inmates were excused from attending the eight daily church services that punctuated the monastic day. However, the spiritual care of monks and nuns in the infirmary was arguably more important than their physical care. All infirmaries were provided with a chapel. This was located at one end of the infirmary – usually the east – and was positioned so that the services celebrated there were visible and audible to the inmates.’

From Carter, M. (2021) ‘How Medieval Monasteries Laid the Foundations of Modern Medicine’ [online], *The Tablet*, The Tablet Publishing Company.

While medieval medics didn’t have things like vaccines or antibiotics, and it wasn’t clear to them what caused different diseases, the information available in many monasteries was as good as any in the medieval period: there were books about healthcare (based on ancient Greek texts by Galen and Hippocrates) and manuals on the properties of herbs. The priory’s herb garden grew specialist plants that were used in medicine to help the body heal itself. Medieval people were also deeply religious, and many believed that if you prayed to the right saints, they’d intervene on your behalf with God.

### DID YOU KNOW?



Some medieval remedies are still around today, like liquorice for coughs, ginger for bad stomachs, and even snail slime for burns.

## 2 LATRINE

The latrine was a large toilet block built over a stream. Communal living was central to Cluniac life, and this even applied to the latrine. Twenty-four monks could use the toilet at the same time!



Look at the map (left) and identify the line of the medieval stream. Circle the latrine block and notice how the building has been cleverly designed in response to the natural features of the landscape, on a spot that allowed for the quick disposal of waste: a particularly fine example of medieval plumbing.

Plumbing technology has improved since medieval times. List two other things that have advanced since then:

1. ....
2. ....



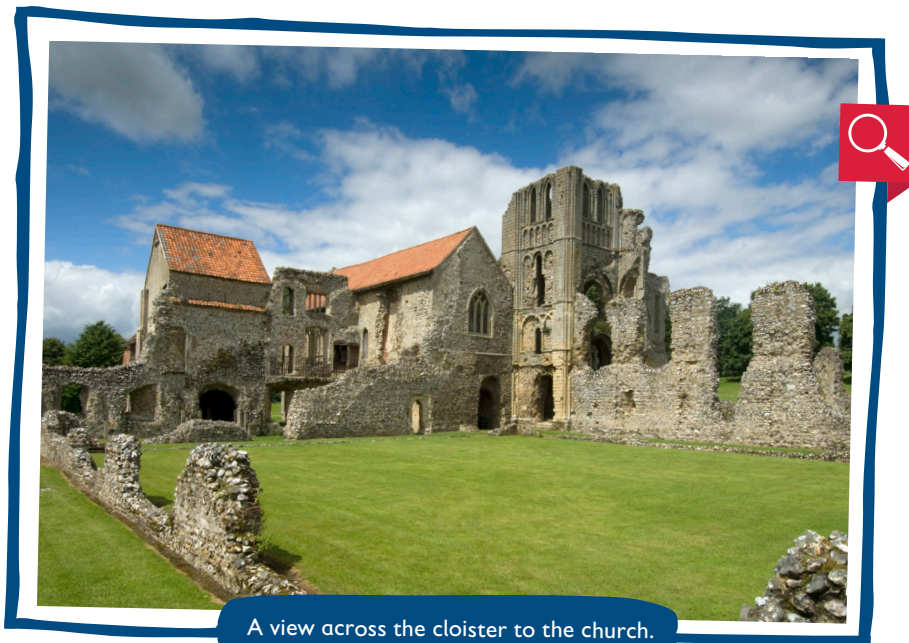
### 3 CLOISTER

The cloister was a quiet, reflective space at the centre of the priory with a square garden, surrounded by a covered passageway. The cloister walkways were sometimes used during religious services: a surviving book from Castle Acre Priory contains music that was to be chanted by the monks as they processed around the cloister.

The red writing says: *Deinde pr[ocession]circa clastru[m]*. Translation: 'Then the procession around the cloister'. The rest of the hymn translates as: 'Hail, full of grace, virgin mother of God, for out of you is arisen the sun of justice, giving light to everything that sits in darkness.'



A page from a Cluniac chant book used at Castle Acre Priory. © Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery



A view across the cloister to the church.

The location of the cloister on the southern side of the church was common in monasteries, allowing the monks to enjoy the warmth and light of the sun. Many monks spent much of the day walking, reading, writing and thinking in the cloister, when not at services in church.

**Walk** slowly and quietly around the cloister, imagining the Cluniac monks doing the same 900 years ago.

**Write** down some words to describe how it might have felt for the monks doing this on a daily basis:

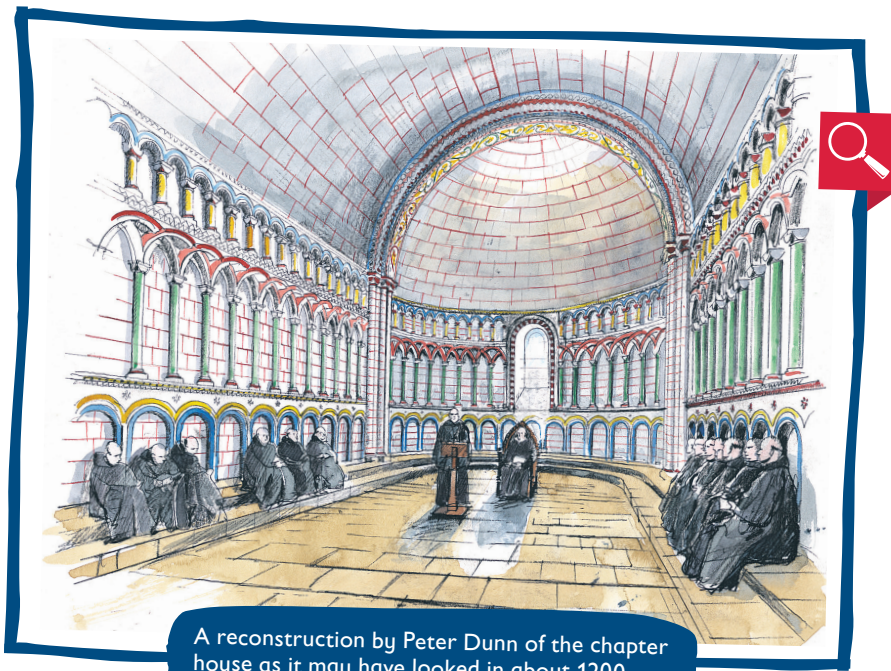
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During your lap, **locate** the wall cupboard next to the chapter house where books were stored. The monks had none of their own belongings, so these were shared books.



## 4 CHAPTER HOUSE



A reconstruction by Peter Dunn of the chapter house as it may have looked in about 1200.



At the base of the north wall are the remains of the monks' bench.

The monks who lived here used to meet at the chapter house at 9am every day to listen to a chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict. The chapter house was also the assembly room of the community, and other things took place here: the business of the priory was discussed, and any rule breaking or disputes between the monks were brought to light.

Go to the chapter house and **read** the following out loud:

### 'CHAPTER 33 WHETHER MONKS OUGHT TO HAVE ANYTHING OF THEIR OWN

The vice of personal ownership must by all means be cut out in the monastery by the very root, so that no one may presume to give or receive anything without the command of the Abbot; nor to have anything whatever as his own, neither a book, nor a writing tablet, nor a pen, nor anything else whatsoever, since monks are allowed to have neither their bodies nor their wills in their own power.'

### 'CHAPTER 48 OF THE DAILY WORK

Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore the brethren ought to be employed in manual labour at certain times, at others, in devout reading. [...] they go out in the morning from the first till about the fourth hour, to do the necessary work, but that from the fourth till about the sixth hour they devote to reading. After the sixth hour, however, when they have risen from table, let them rest in their beds in complete silence.'

Extracts from *The Holy Rule of Saint Benedict*, translated by Rev. Boniface Verheyen, 1949 edition. The Cluniac monks at Castle Acre Priory swore an oath of obedience, vowing never to break these strict Benedictine rules.

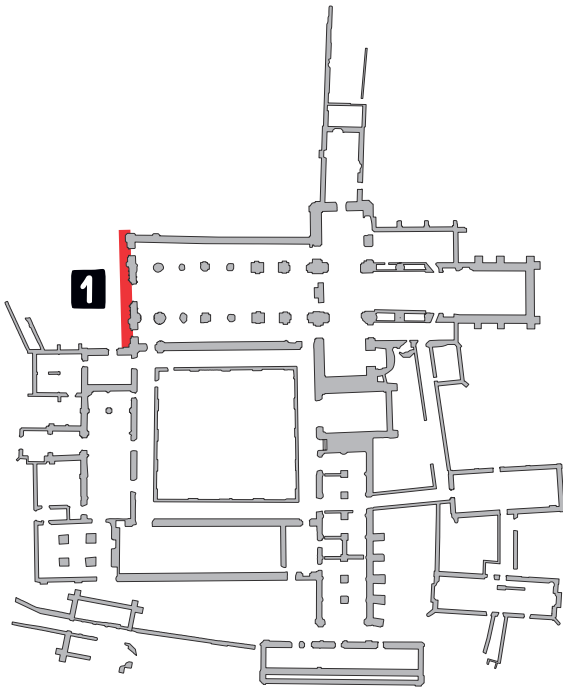
**Reflect** on what you've just read. How easy/difficult would you find it to follow these rules and why? Now **take photos** as evidence of the interior of the chapter house.

In particular, **notice** the remains of the carved decorations on the walls, plus the stone benches that the monks used to sit on.

## 5 CHURCH

Many Normans thought that English churches were small and old-fashioned, so they began a rebuilding programme which included a new style of church that was designed to be more suited to the elaborate style of worship and ritual seen at Cluny.

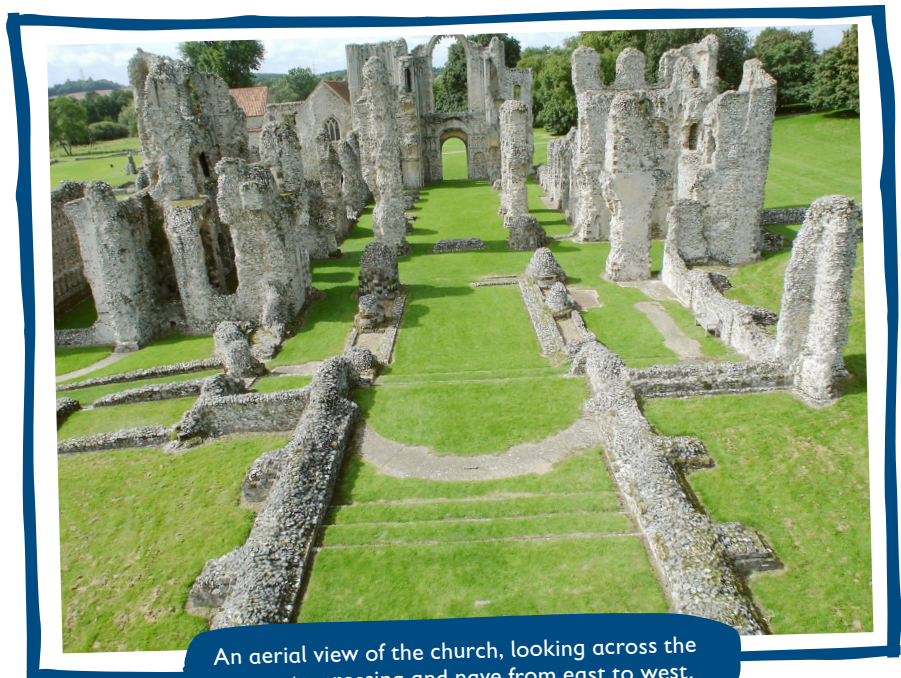
Worship was concentrated at the east end of the building. The sun rises in the east, so it would shine through the beautiful windows at this end of the church during morning services. Most churches from this period were orientated in this way, with the symbolic cross shape linking to the death and resurrection of Jesus.



**Label** the plan of the church with the following, and take a **photo** of each:

1. West front
2. Nave
3. South aisle
4. North aisle
5. Crossing
6. Choir
7. Presbytery
8. South transept
9. North transept
10. Sacristy

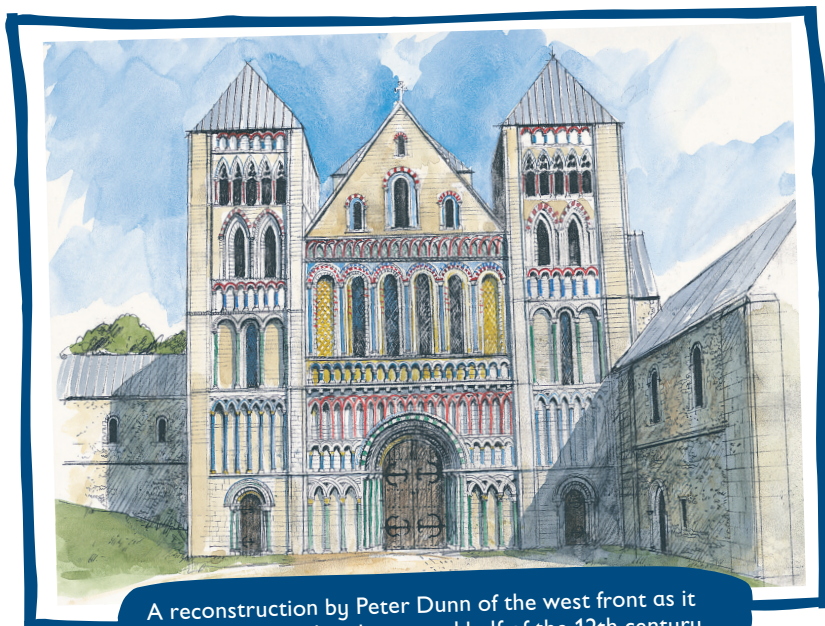
Now **label** this photo with any other architectural details you spot while exploring the church:



An aerial view of the church, looking across the transepts, crossing and nave from east to west.



## 6 WEST FRONT



A reconstruction by Peter Dunn of the west front as it may have looked in the second half of the 12th century.



Looking up at the west front, **find** examples of the following type of stonework and take a close-up **photo** or make a quick **sketch** of each:

TYPE	POSITION	SHAPE	FEATURES	SKETCH
BASE	On the floor, at the bottom of a column	Cuboid	Corner scrolls carved on the top for decoration	
SHAFT	One of several stones stacked on top of each other to form a column	Cylinder	Can be smooth and plain or carved with bold shapes	
CAPITAL	Sits at the top of a column or shaft and supports the arch	Trapezoid (a block that narrows at the bottom)	Carved with leafy decorations	
VOUSSOIR (VOO-SWAR)	One of several stones that are joined together to form an archway	Curved trapezoid (one segment of a semi-circular arch)	Carved with bold shapes including zigzags, chevrons (arrow-shapes), step-shapes and circles	



## 7 HERB GARDEN

This garden has been planted with herbs commonly used in a medieval monastery. The herbs are arranged into four sections based on their different uses: to heal the sick, to mask bad smells, to flavour food and drink, or to decorate the priory church.



A late-13th-century picture of a man being bled, a medical treatment believed to cure and prevent illness, undergone several times a year by most medieval monks. © The British Library

### DID YOU KNOW?

Medieval medicine was based on the notion of the body having four 'humours' related to the four elements:

- blood (air) was hot and moist
- phlegm (water) was cold and moist
- yellow bile (fire) was hot and dry
- black bile (earth) was cold and dry.

It was the physician's job to work out how to restore the balance of a person's humours if they became ill, and so plants and herbs were prescribed to redress the balance. A cooling herb would be used if you were considered to have too much blood, for example.

**Imagine** you are a medieval medic, working at Castle Acre Priory in the infirmary. A monk has come to you for help with the following illness: a chesty cough, which causes him to cough up green phlegm.

**Select** one of these three herbs to prescribe:

A. Clary sage was also known as 'clear eye' and 'Oculus Christi' (Eye of Christ) because its main use was as an eyewash, made by infusing sweet-scented leaves in water.

B. Chamomile is said to revive the sickly and drooping plants growing near it. Once you have enough of them, chamomile flowers are good for making stomach-calming teas that help with digestion and also combat flatulence.

C. Hyssop was considered to have hot, purging qualities. Drunk in oil, wine or syrup, it was meant to warm away mucus from colds and chest phlegm. It was also rubbed on bruises to soothe them.

Now **find** these herbs growing in the garden at Castle Acre Priory and **take** close-up photos of them.

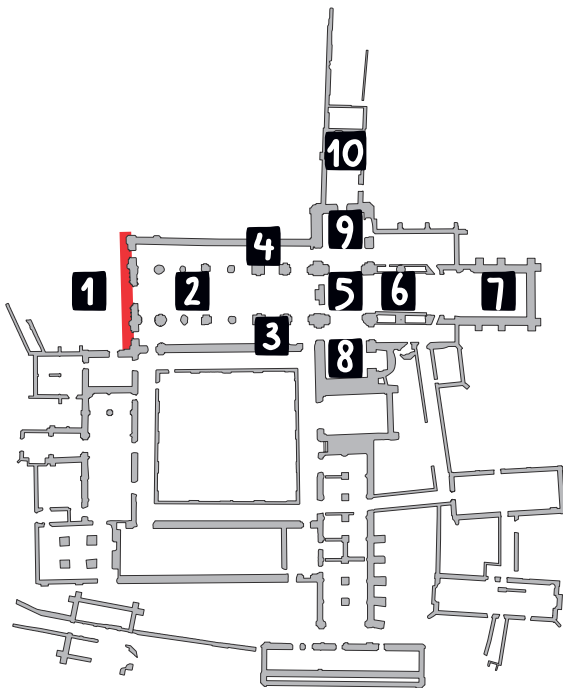
# ANSWERS TO ACTIVITIES AT THE PRIORY

## AT THE CLOISTER

**Write** down some words to describe how it might have felt for the monks doing this on a daily basis.

Possible answers (not exhaustive): serene, reflective, peaceful, repetitive, boring, therapeutic, spiritual, meditative, ritualistic.

## AT THE CHURCH



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## RESEARCH AND REVISION

PEOPLE AND EVENTS  
CONNECTED WITH  
THE SITE

In your exam, you'll need to show a good understanding of how Castle Acre Priory is connected with wider events and developments from the Norman period. Below is some historical information to help with your research and revision.

### GUNDRADA AND WILLIAM DE WARENNE

By 1066 there was already a settlement at Acre, in Norfolk, together with a church and the house of a substantial Anglo-Saxon landowner called Toki. Toki had his lands taken from him by Norman invaders. His lands were briefly held by a Flemish family chosen by William the Conqueror, and their Norfolk property descended to an heiress, Gundrada. It was through her that William I de Warenne, her husband, gained control of Acre in about 1070.

William de Warenne was one of the many Normans whose fortunes were transformed due to his presence at the Battle of Hastings. William the Conqueror consulted William de Warenne about his plans for an invasion of England in 1066 and they fought beside each other at Hastings. Only the king and his two half-brothers, Odo of Bayeux and Robert of Mortain, along with the king's long-standing friend, Roger de Montgomery, were wealthier than Warenne. When the newly crowned King William returned to Normandy in 1067, Warenne was one of the four men left in charge of England.



A stained-glass depiction of William de Warenne at the Church of St John the Baptist at Southover, in Lewes, where Gundrada and William are buried. © Public Domain



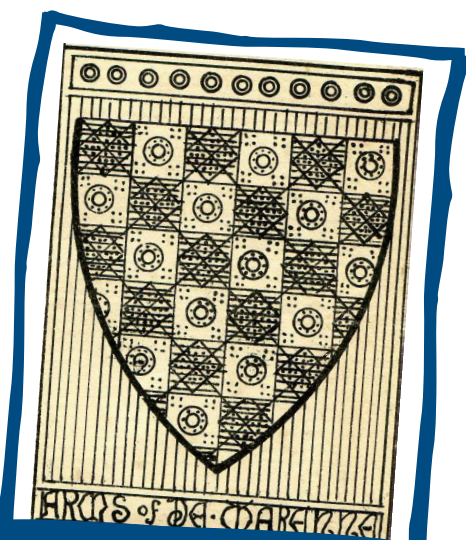
## THE CLUNIACS

A huge and very important monastery was founded at Cluny, in Burgundy (now part of France), in AD 910. The monks who founded it were seeking a more rigorous interpretation of the Rule of St Benedict, the basis of most medieval monastic life. Cluniacs became known for the length and intricate nature of their church services,

which were governed by a detailed system of rules. They had a love of art and decoration, as an embellishment and enhancement of the worship of God, which is shown at Castle Acre Priory. The abbey at Cluny became the centre of a huge network of monasteries and religious houses throughout Western Europe, each of which followed Cluny and copied its ways of worshipping. William and Gundrada visited Cluny while on pilgrimage in the early 1080s. They were impressed by the buildings and the lifestyle of the monks, and they arranged for Cluniac monks to be installed in England at a monastery in Sussex (at Lewes). Around 1088, some Cluniac monks, probably only four or five, were established on Warenne's lands at Acre in Norfolk, as an offshoot of the priory at Lewes.



The abbey church at Cluny viewed from the north in 1617. Today little more remains of the church than the south transept and its tower (third from left).  
© Bibliothèque nationale de France



The de Warenne family arms. © Norfolk Museum Archive Service

## WILLIAM II DE WARENNE

William and Gundrada's eldest son, William II de Warenne, carried on his parents' project. He wasn't impressed with the monks' living conditions (on a very small site) so he granted them additional financial support and land. He also gave them a workman, 'Ulmar the mason of Acre', to help construct the new buildings. The monks probably moved over to their new, more spacious accommodation in about 1100. They would have lived in timber buildings while the rest of the priory was completed over the next fifty years. Construction of the priory was a slow process; the church was not officially consecrated until 1146–8.

## THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS

The Battle of Hastings was fought on 14 October 1066 between the Norman army of Duke William of Normandy and an English army under King Harold. It lasted all day, and was exceptionally bloody even by medieval standards. When Harold was eventually killed and the English fled, the way was open for William to assume the throne of England. William's victory at Hastings earned him the nickname 'the Conqueror'. He was crowned by Christmas and Norman influence swept across the country. In the years that followed, the Normans had a profound impact on the country they had conquered, some of which can be seen at Castle Acre Priory.



The death of the English king, Harold, at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, as depicted in Scene 57 of the Bayeux Tapestry.  
© Public Domain

## ENGLISH REBELLIONS



An illustration of William the Conqueror c.1066.

What we now refer to as 'the Norman Conquest' was not a single battle or event: 1066 was the start of a vast upheaval, played out over twenty years.

William the Conqueror went back to Normandy in 1067. He was still Duke of Normandy, as well as King of England. English resistance flared up in the summer of 1067 in Kent, the Midlands and the South-west. But those taking part had no way of coordinating their actions and, when William I returned to England in December 1067, he was able to pick off the local rebellions one by one. The worst of these clashes centred on York, where William I had ordered two castles to be built in 1068. William de Warenne helped fight against English rebels in York, and subsequently acquired a large estate near Conisbrough in Yorkshire.

To prevent further uprisings, William I's army carried out the brutal Harrying of the North in 1069–70. King William's soldiers assaulted villages in Yorkshire, murdering much of the adult male population, burning houses and driving the surviving inhabitants into the wilderness. By 1072 all the English rebellions were crushed and King William left for Normandy.

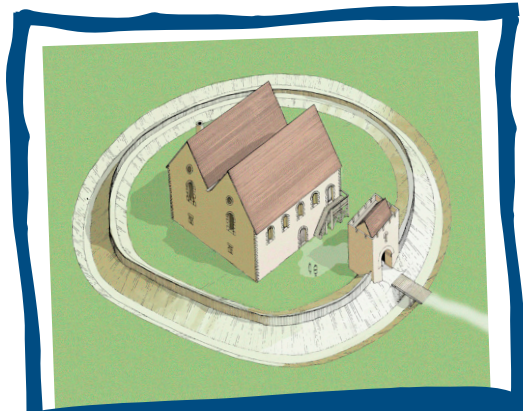
## CASTLE BUILDING

An intensive programme of fortress building controlled William I's newly conquered land.

The Normans' first castles were ditched and banked earthwork enclosures (the bailey), defended by a wooden palisade (fence) and often including a mound (or motte), a strongpoint with its own ditch and stockade. Earthwork motte-and-bailey castles were quickly and easily constructed – local forced labour helped. Well over five hundred such castles were built in the twenty years after 1066.

The timber palisades of the bailey were soon replaced with stone 'curtain' walls. Those of the motte were replaced with circular stone-walled 'shell keeps'.

Keeps – also known as 'great towers' – were the chief strongpoints of some early castles, and may also have been where the owner or his representative resided. Small stone keeps could be built on the top of mounds, but larger keeps required firmer foundations.



The inner bailey defences at Castle Acre Castle, as originally completed c.1070, surrounded by a rampart with a wooden palisade, with the addition of a stone gatehouse.



An illustration of an archbishop (the highest-ranking member of the Church) from the Norman period.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGION

William the Conqueror imposed a total reorganisation of the English Church after the conquest of 1066. He had secured the pope's blessing for his invasion by promising to reform the 'irregularities' of the Anglo-Saxon Church, which had developed its own distinctive customs. Medieval society was deeply religious. The Church was a pervasive force in people's lives. The Catholic Church – then the only Church in Western Europe – had huge amounts of power and influence at every level of society.

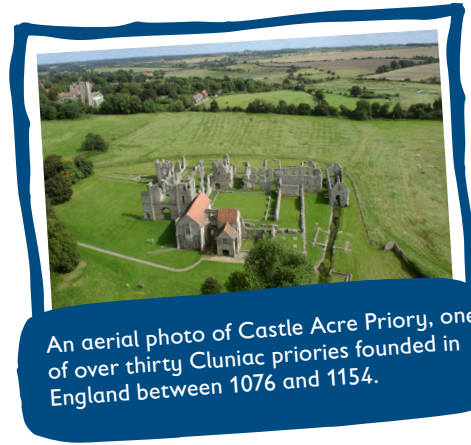
William I's reforms of the Church were an instrument of conquest, alongside his knights and castles. Within a decade nearly all Anglo-Saxon bishops and abbots had lost their positions to Normans. The century and a half after the conquest also saw a campaign of church, cathedral and monastery building on a scale never before seen in England.



## PRIORY BUILDING

Many Norman landholders founded small communities of monks on their English estates because they believed it would help them get to heaven after the bloodshed of the Norman Conquest. Some nobles, like de Warenne, chose to create Cluniac priories. Because Cluny was a French house with no links to England before the 1070s, building Cluniac priories meant that a Norman could associate himself with his English estates yet avoid any connection with Anglo-Saxon monasteries.

Between 1081 and 1083, William de Warenne and his wife, Gundrada, stayed at the abbey of Cluny in Burgundy, France. The visit made such a great impression on them that they decided to create an English priory at Lewes that would follow the rule of Cluny. They decided that Castle Acre Priory should follow suit and become the daughter-house of Lewes Priory. Before the priory could be founded, Gundrada died in childbirth on 27 May 1085 and William de Warenne was struck by a fatal arrow in 1088 while besieging Pevensey Castle in Sussex.



An aerial view of Pevensey Castle, on the Sussex coast.

## THE SIEGE OF PEVENSEY CASTLE (1088)

After the death of William I in September 1087, William's sons squabbled about who should be the new king of England. When William died, he gave Normandy in France to his eldest son, Robert, making him the new Duke of Normandy. Meanwhile, Robert's younger brother, William Rufus, succeeded his father as king of England, becoming King William II (r.1087–1100). William de Warenne supported the new king, William II, who granted de

Warenne three valuable Surrey manors as a way of keeping his loyalty.

Duke Robert believed he had the right to be king instead of his younger brother. William the Conqueror's half-brothers – Robert, Count of Mortain, and Odo, Bishop of Bayeux – sided with Duke Robert. Together, they held Pevensey Castle against William II, on behalf of Duke Robert. The aim of their revolt was to replace William with Robert on the English throne. To stop his brother invading England via the rebel stronghold at Pevensey, William II personally supervised a siege by land and sea in 1088, supported by William de Warenne. Pevensey Castle's powerful defences resisted every attack but the rebels trapped inside were finally forced to seek a truce when they ran out of food. Warenne was wounded by an arrow during the siege and died of his wounds later that year.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

For more than a century after the Battle of Hastings, all substantial stone buildings in England were built in the Romanesque style. Known in the British Isles as 'Norman', it is a direct descendant of late Roman architecture. It includes semi-circular arches, columns, thick walls and small windows to create a sense of awe and intimacy. The walls, pillars and arches of many Norman buildings were painted in bright colours. From the early 12th century, carved decoration and elaborate surface patterns also became more common. Doorways were flanked by rows of columns, and topped by concentric arches often carved with zigzags, or encrusted with signs of the zodiac or animal faces. The capitals (heads) of pillars were also frequently carved – perhaps with scallops or leaves. Wall surfaces might be decorated with tiers of intersecting round arches carved in low relief, as at Castle Acre Priory.



A view of the west front of the church at Castle Acre Priory, a particularly fine example of Romanesque and Gothic architecture.

The Romanesque style was replaced from the later 12th century by a new style – the Gothic. 'Gothic' refers to a style of architecture popular between the 12th and 16th centuries, which includes high ceilings, pointed arches, and detailed window frames (called 'tracery') to create a feeling of grandeur and wonder.

Castle Acre Priory took almost fifty years to construct, and architectural tastes changed during this time. This can be seen at the west front, where the doorways and lower three sections are built in the Romanesque style, typical of the early 1100s, whereas the pointed arches at the top of the south tower appear to have been built in the Gothic style, perhaps as late as 1160.

## FURTHER READING ON...

1066 AND THE NORMAN CONQUEST: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/1066-and-the-norman-conquest](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/1066-and-the-norman-conquest)

MEDIEVAL WARFARE: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval/war](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval/war)

MEDIEVAL RELIGION: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval/religion](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval/religion)

MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval/architecture>

MEDIEVAL MEDICINE: [www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1714/how-medieval-monasteries-laid-the-foundations-of-modern-medicine](http://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1714/how-medieval-monasteries-laid-the-foundations-of-modern-medicine)

MONASTIC GARDENS: <https://blog.english-heritage.org.uk/how-to-garden-like-a-medieval-monk>