

# The Benedictine Abbey of St John

## Management Plan

### 1.0 Introduction

Colchester possesses two monastic buildings that have survived from the Middle Ages - St Botolph's Priory and St John's Abbey Gatehouse. Both are Scheduled Ancient Monuments and therefore of national importance. St John's Abbey Gatehouse is the only surviving building of the great Benedictine abbey that once dominated the area to the south of the medieval town.

Colchester Borough Council is committed to the preservation and protection of the Gatehouse from the pressures of natural erosion, human damage and commercial interest. The Borough Council are seeking to work with the land owner(s) of the wider scheduled ancient monument to encourage best practice in the care of the archaeological remains. The production of this management plan is an obligation placed on the Borough Council under the terms of the local management agreement. This management plan has been drawn up to satisfy the objectives set out in the Council's *Archaeological Policy* (1997) and *Policy and Guidelines on the Management of Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites in Colchester* (1997). The plan sets out a framework for the management of the monument over the next five year period.

### 1.1 Aims and objectives

The aim of the management plan is: **To ensure the appropriate care and interpretation of St John's Abbey Gatehouse and the surrounding scheduled area.**

The broad objectives of the management plan can be summarised as follows:

- To outline a maintenance and repair programme that will ensure the long term survival of the gatehouse.
- To ensure that all works relating to the gatehouse and the surrounding scheduled area are carried out in conformity with legal requirements and best archaeological practice, after appropriate assessment, evaluation and where necessary procedures relating to scheduled monument consent.
- To maintain and where appropriate enhance the visual clarity of the gatehouse and encourage the development of a sympathetic and appropriate setting.
- To ensure that archaeological management initiatives operate wherever possible in harmony with the concerns of ecological/environmental management in the Borough.
- To ensure that archaeological management initiatives operate where appropriate in harmony with the concerns of access, amenity and commercial values operating around the monument.

- To help schools and other educational bodies make the best use of the monument and to stimulate life long learning.
- To enhance the general public's understanding and appreciation of the Abbey and its history.
- To ensure that due consideration is given to issues of public safety at the gatehouse.

## **2.0 Background**

### **2.1 The location of St John's Abbey Gatehouse**

St John's Abbey gatehouse is located to the south of Colchester town centre at NGR TL 99832468 and is part of a scheduled ancient monument (National Monument Number 26307). The abbey gatehouse is a Grade 1 Listed Building. It also lies within the designated Conservation Area of St John's Green (Figs 1, 2).

### **2.2 Ownership**

The site of the gatehouse is in the freehold ownership of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The Ministry of Defence owns the remainder of the scheduled area.

### **2.3 Architectural Description**

The gatehouse consists of two parts, the gate hall and an adjacent porter's lodge. It is of two storeys and its walls are of flint and brick with limestone dressings. The north elevation is the more elaborate with extensive use of flint flushwork decoration.

The north elevation is characterised by a main gate with a tall four-centred archway and to the right a smaller side gate. To either side and above the main gate are large ornamented niches. The upper storey has two two-light windows and is battlemented at roof level. The elevation has flanking octagonal turrets with large crocketed pinnacles.

The south elevation has only the main gate, again with a four-centred arch, and above a central window.

Adjoining the west side of the gatehouse there was originally a further building which no longer exists. From this lost structure a door gives access to a staircase in the south-west turret of the gate house. This stair leads up to an upper room in the gatehouse itself and then onto the roof.

The gate hall has a ribbed vault of stone, the ribs springing from moulded corbels carved with two human heads and two lions. In the east wall a doorway gives access into the porter's lodge, while in the west wall there is a recess and a doorway into the now destroyed adjacent building.

The room above the gate hall is single undivided space measuring approximately 7.3m by 5.4m. It is lit by two two-light windows on the north wall and a single two-light window on the south wall. All the windows have diamond-lead panes and there is some evidence of wooden shutters in the form of locking points on the central mullion and hooks to either side. There is a wooden planked floor and a coffered wooden ceiling, both probably of nineteenth century date. There is a cast iron fireplace in the west wall with the inscription 'YATES HAYWOOD & Co ROTHERHAM & LONDON', again of nineteenth century date, and an adjacent series of coat hooks.

The porter's lodge was originally of two storeys with an attic, but is now roofless. The rough south wall seems to indicate that it formerly extended further in that direction.

Adjacent to the Gatehouse to the west there survives part of the monastic precinct wall, which is composed of rubble and sixteenth century brick. In places there are also worked and moulded stones incorporated in the fabric. This is included in the scheduling as well as other smaller sections of the original precinct wall.

## **2.4 History of the Monument**

St John's Abbey was founded in 1095 according to tradition by Eudo Dapifer, the High Steward of Normandy and constable of Colchester Castle. The site chosen for the new abbey was already occupied by a small, pre-conquest church dedicated to St John the Baptist and served by a priest called Siric. Parts of a Roman cemetery also underlie the site. The first monastic buildings were completed by 1115 and lay to the north of Siric's church.

The abbey was burnt down in 1133 and the church rebuilt on a cruciform plan. Building work may have continued for some time for in 1235 Henry III gave the abbey fifteen oaks. Building repairs were undertaken in 1363 and in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries side chapels were added to both the nave and chancel of the abbey church.

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, perhaps as a result of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, the abbey strengthened its defences, making repairs and additions to its precinct wall. The gatehouse was also constructed during this period, probably in the first decades of the fifteenth century.

Several distinguished visitors may have stayed at St John's Abbey, including possibly Richard Duke of Gloucester (Richard III) in 1467 and definitely Queen Catherine of Aragon in 1515. After the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 Lord Lovell and other prominent Yorkists took sanctuary at the abbey and attempted to ferment rebellion against Henry Tudor (John Ashdown-Hill pers. comm.).

During the Dissolution of the Monasteries from 1536-1540 St John's was one of a handful of abbeys that refused to surrender voluntarily to Henry VIII's commissioners. The house was eventually closed as a result of the trial and

execution of the last abbot, Thomas Marshall or Beche, for treason. He was hanged at Colchester on 1 December 1539 (VCH 1907, 98-100).

After the Dissolution, the property passed to various individuals and was eventually acquired by the Lucas family, who resided at the site until the mid-seventeenth century. During the Siege of Colchester in 1648 the former abbey was used as a royalist outpost and suffered considerable damage. The gatehouse in particular was stormed by parliamentarian troops whose artillery destroyed part of the upper storey.

The remaining abbey buildings, except the gatehouse, seem to have been demolished after the site was used to house Dutch prisoners in the 1660s.

In the 1840s the gatehouse was extensively restored to what appears to be a faithful copy of the fifteenth century design. At this time the battlements and window tracery of the upper storey were replaced.

The site was bought by the War Office in 1860 from the Baring family.

Extensive restoration occurred in circa 1951 when repairs were undertaken to the roof, a new door installed in the stair turret at the roof level, and fitch plates inserted in the roof beams of the first floor. Further work was undertaken in 1984 to consolidate and repoint the external walls.

Management of the monument was transferred to English Heritage under section 34 of the National Heritage Act 1983. From April 1995 'the proper and efficient day to day management of the Property' has been the responsibility of Colchester Borough Council. This local management agreement was renewed in 2000 and 2005.

In April 1998 English Heritage purchased a narrow strip of land to the west of the gatehouse to facilitate public access without the need to cross Ministry of Defence land.

In 2003, the lead flashing to the roof and an area of masonry of the arch of the south window was repaired.

## **2.5 Archaeological discoveries and features**

Other buried remains at this site include the main monastic buildings, as well as the seventeenth Century house and formal gardens that occupied the site following the Dissolution of the abbey in 1539 and part of a Roman cemetery. Visual remains include a prospect mound, thought to have been for viewing the gardens, and the axial walkway, which may indicate the position of the house.

A series of small-scale excavations took place between 1971 and 1977 within the precinct of St John's Abbey. The principal discoveries were a small church predating the foundation of the abbey (Siric's Church), some medieval

burials, a large quantity of dumped soil, and some burnt buildings with walls of sandy clay (Crummy 1981, 40-6).

In 2002 a geophysical survey was undertaken at the site that investigated areas including the grass and hard tennis courts, and car parks. The survey was intended to try and locate the foundations of the Abbey and possibly the Lucas residence. The results were inconclusive but revealed the existence of sections of wall beneath the grounds of the Officer's Club.

Also during 2002, the Colchester Archaeological Trust undertook excavation within St John's Abbey as part of the Colchester Garrison redevelopment. Six trenches were excavated within the scheduled area, which revealed primarily post-medieval and modern material, although two Roman pits and two Roman ditches were discovered, along with a quantity of Roman pottery, brick, tile and single pieces of septaria and *tessera*.

Colchester's Urban Archaeological Database (UAD) holds records for the site which include finds of coins at the site (EVT933 and 1131), burials (EVT1197 and 1126), surveys and archaeological watching briefs that have been undertaken at the site (EVT1304, 1582, 3380 and 3550) and any other finds that have been made at the site, for example: EVT3894, a tombstone fragment that was found in St John's Abbey wall.

### **3.0 Importance**

#### **3.1 National Level**

The abbey gatehouse functioned as the main entrance to the monastic precinct. A considerable number of gatehouses have survived in England, including splendid examples such as St John's Gate in Clerkenwell, London and at Thornton Abbey, Lincolnshire as well as more modest structures such as that at Maxstoke Priory, Warwickshire. The gatehouse entrance was vaulted and high enough to allow heavily laden carts to go through. Above the arch would be a courtroom or a schoolroom, and flanking it would be side doors for pedestrians and sometimes side rooms for guests. In some cases the gatehouse might be fortified and its roof battlemented (Butler and Given-Wilson 1979, 65).

#### **3.2 County Level**

St John's Abbey Gatehouse is one of the principal Perpendicular structures in Essex. It was described by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as 'a splendid piece of display, characteristically more ornate to the outer world than to the abbey precincts' (Pevsner 1965, 137). The only comparable structure in the county is the gatehouse of St Osyth's Priory, which is of similar date and construction. Both of these buildings are characterised by the use of flushwork, a technique that involves the use of knapped flint and ashlar stone to create patterns in the fabric of the wall. It is a typically 'East Anglian' type of decoration and may be seen in several Essex churches including Dedham, Ardleigh and Brightlingsea.

The Roman cemetery is also an important feature of the site that may serve to act as a useful comparison to other cemetery sites in Colchester (for example Butt Road). The developments on the site following the Dissolution are also significant. Formal gardens were intended to express wealth and refinement and accompanied high status residences.

#### **4.0 Review of Actions achieved**

Over the last five years a number of actions identified in the previous monument management plan have been achieved.

In order to clarify lines of responsibility, the Curator of Archaeology has agreed to take responsibility for managing the monument. Various other individuals involved with the monitoring and maintenance of the monument will keep the curator informed of any developments. A yearly Risk Assessment is undertaken at the site, which highlights potential problems. General maintenance at the site also includes annual safety checks of the earthing rods located on the roof of the gatehouse.

Enhancing the natural history of the site has included controlling the growth of certain plant species (for example ivy), to prevent damage to the external walls of the monument and encourage the growth of lichen colonies.

In order to improve site security and safety, a boundary fence has been erected to enclose a narrow strip of land to the west of the building to enable public access without the need to cross Ministry of Defence land. English Heritage advised that access to the roof area could present a safety hazard as well as potentially causing damage to the lead covering on the roof. Therefore, a padlock has been fitted to the door at the top of the stairs to prevent public access to the roof.

In order to improve site interpretation, a new exterior site information board was fitted in 2005 to replace the old style English Heritage 'green sign'. English Heritage provided funding for the new sign and Colchester Museums were involved with the design for the replacement sign.

#### **5.0 Programme of Future Action**

##### **5.1 Introduction**

At the start of the period of this management plan St John's Abbey Gatehouse appears to be structurally sound, but is an under-used heritage resource. As well as ensuring the physical survival of the structure it is important to develop the monument's use by the public. Within a programme of action it is possible to identify ongoing and specific objectives.

## **5.2 Ongoing objectives**

- Regular monitoring of the building
- A costed maintenance programme for the structure

## **5.3 Specific objectives: 1-5 years**

- Improve public access and enhance public enjoyment of the building
- Maintain and enhance the setting of the monument.
- Enhance the natural environment of the site
- Improve and maintain access to Abbey Gatehouse
- To inspect and repair niches above gateway arch and cracks on lead roof
- To whitewash interior of the upper room

## **6.0 Strategy and Methodology**

Below a strategy is outlined for achieving each of the stated objectives:

### **6.1 Ongoing objectives**

#### **1. Regular monitoring of the gatehouse**

##### **Strategy: Yearly inspection co-ordinated by the Curator of Archaeology**

It is recommended that a yearly inspection should be undertaken in conjunction with English Heritage. This would involve an inspection of the fabric of the building, including the condition of the timber gates and the lead roof. This inspection would aim to identify any routine and emergency repairs that may be necessary. It would also be appropriate for the Curator of Natural History to visit the building and report on any ecological issues. The building will also be visited by Council staff on a regular basis to monitor its condition.

#### **2. A costed maintenance programme for the structure**

##### **Strategy: Regular maintenance of grounds and newly fenced area to include litter scavenge, weed, mow and tidy**

It is most important that the monument is kept in a presentable condition. Litter and other rubbish should not be allowed to accumulate and weed growth should be discouraged. An amount should be specified every year for grounds maintenance in the English Heritage budget. In 2006/2007 this was £350.

## **6.2 Specific objectives: 1-5 years**

### **1. Improve public access and enhance public enjoyment of the building**

#### **Strategy: Develop the site as a visitor attraction**

For several years St John's Abbey Gatehouse has been opened to the public for two days in September, normally the middle weekend, as part of the Heritage Open Days scheme co-ordinated by the Civic Trust. It is proposed that this arrangement continue and that opportunities be sought to open the building on a more regular basis. Additional openings could be arranged for groups, such as archaeological societies and other historical, educational or amenity bodies, which could be both local to and outside of Colchester. For example in the past the local branches of the Young Archaeologists Club and the Richard III Society have visited the monument.

At present there exists a narrow (2.0m wide) strip of land flanking the Abbey Gatehouse that enables access to the interior of the gatehouse. It has been proposed that an additional area of disused orchard that lies directly adjacent to this strip should be acquired. This would enable the improved interpretation of the site and the potential for occasional small events by specialist groups and schools.

It may also be possible to incorporate the site into a Blue Badge Guided Tour of the town, perhaps in conjunction with St Botolph's Priory and the site of the Roman Circus. However it should be noted that the gatehouse is located at some distance from the normal town centre route across a busy urban ring road and this may prove to be a disincentive to some visitors.

**Timescale: 2007/8**

### **2. Maintain and enhance the setting of the monument**

#### **Strategy: Ensure Garrison Redevelopment does not have a detrimental impact on the monument**

Colchester Garrison is currently undergoing a major re-development scheme which will involve the relocation of military usage to the south of the present site. The Colchester Garrison Urban Village Masterplan layout Plan July 2004 shows the area of the scheduled ancient monument zoned as green space.

It is imperative that vehicular access be discouraged or even prevented through the archway of the gatehouse. In the past goods vehicles have caused damage to the side of the inner archway. It should therefore be recognised that this is not an appropriate means of access to this area of the development site. This is an objective of the Masterplan and is due to be implemented in the next few years.

**Timescale: 2009/10(?)**

### **Strategy: Improve maintenance and visual condition of site**

The Porter's Lodge has become rather overgrown internally and it is felt it would benefit from clearance and the laying of gravel on the ground surface. Therefore, proposed works include: to de-weed the courtyard area and clear all debris, before spraying with weed killer. A geotextile membrane will be laid and covered with 20mm depth of 6mm shingle.

The close-boarded timber fence that lies directly adjacent to the Abbey Gatehouse, providing access to the upper levels of the building will be treated with wood preserver, including posts and gravel boards.

Maintenance will also take place on the area located at the left hand side of the entrance behind the new oak fence. Proposed works are to clean and relay six granite setts on a mortar bed and re-point joints.

**Timescale: 2006/7**

### **3. Enhance the natural environment of the site**

#### **Strategy: Ensure that the monument offers an appropriate habitat**

It is recommended that a lichenologist be commissioned to carry out a lichen survey of the monument in advance of any external maintenance work.

**Timescale: 2006/7**

### **4. Improve and maintain access to Abbey Gatehouse**

#### **Strategy: Repair and replace timber doors**

The two timber doors that provide access to the upper levels of the gatehouse building are deteriorating rapidly so repair and maintenance work has been recommended and Scheduled Monument Consent obtained. It is proposed that the doorway on the right leading out of the gatehouse will be re-manufactured and treated with wood preserver and re-hung using all existing iron works and locks. The facing boards on the second door leading to the staircase will be removed and replaced. This door will also be treated with wood preservative and re-hung using all existing fittings.

**Timescale: 2006/7**

#### **Strategy: Fit hand rail to staircase in gatehouse**

To improve access to the upper room of the gatehouse, it has been proposed that a rope handrail be fitted to the spiral staircase.

**Timescale: 2007/8**

## **5. Inspect and repair niches above gateway arch and cracks to lead roof**

A surveyor should inspect the entrance façade of the gatehouse and make recommendations on appropriate course of action. The specified masonry repairs should be undertaken as soon as possible. A surveyor will also be commissioned to inspect the lead flashing to the gatehouse roof and report on the appropriate course of action.

**Timescale: 2006/7**

## **6. Whitewashing of the upper room**

Appropriate advice should be obtained regarding the whitewashing of the interior of the upper room of the gatehouse and a specialist contractor appointed in due course.

**Timescale: 2007/8**

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