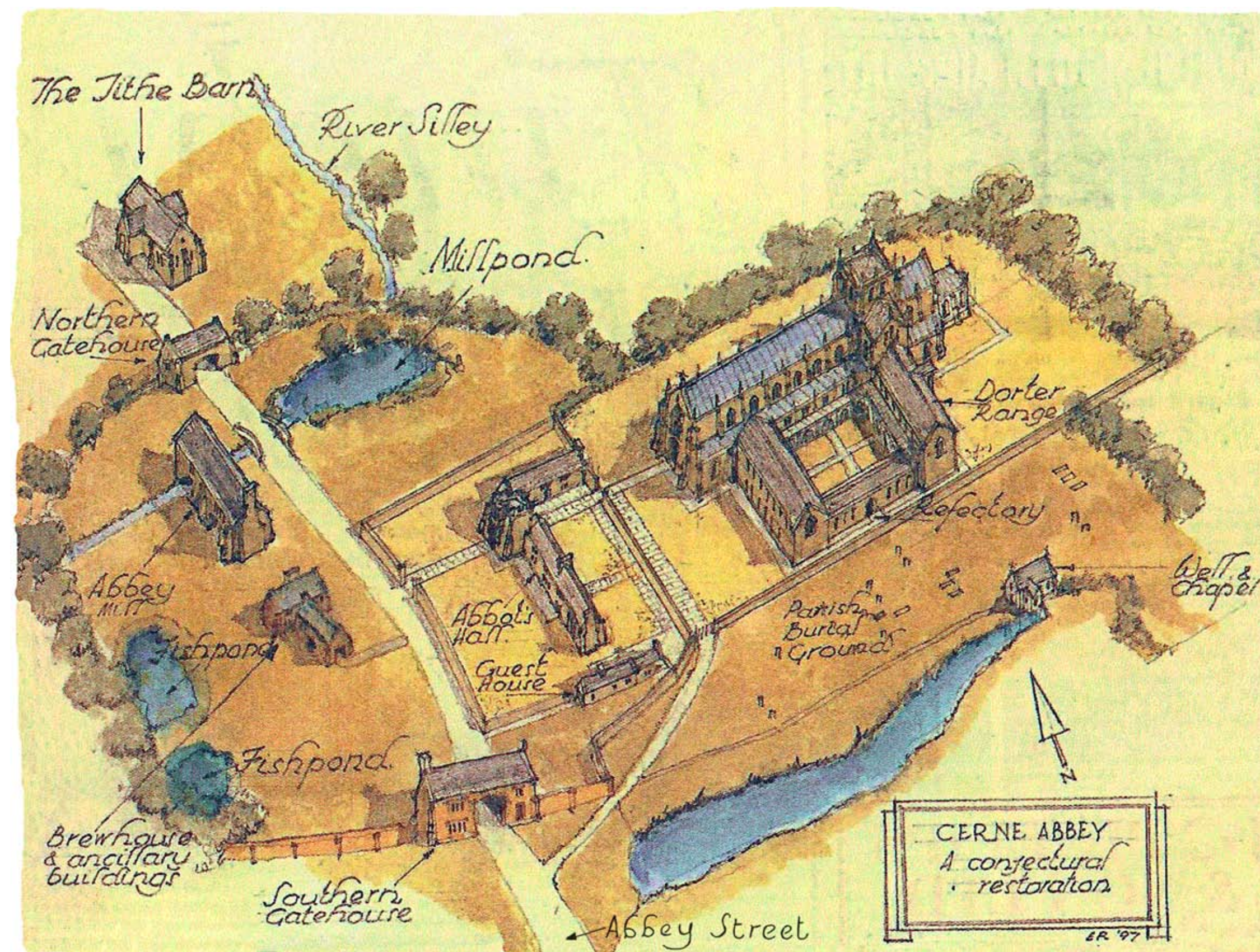


# The Abbey's Foundation

The illustration builds a picture of what the Abbey may have looked like. Bustling with activity the South Gate leads directly into the town along Abbey Street, the main commercial centre.

The North Gate entrance would have been busy with wagons taking produce between the farm and either the barn close by or the Tithe Barn further to the west of the town. Almost all of the townsfolk were working for the Abbey in one way or another.



*The Abbey as it might have been*

Cerne Abbey was founded in 987 - the date confirmed in its charter written in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century. What, though, was significant about 987 and why Cerne? The Cerne Abbey story starts in 870 when Edwold refused the East Anglian crown and came to live near Cerne as a hermit. Edwold's arrival must have created the

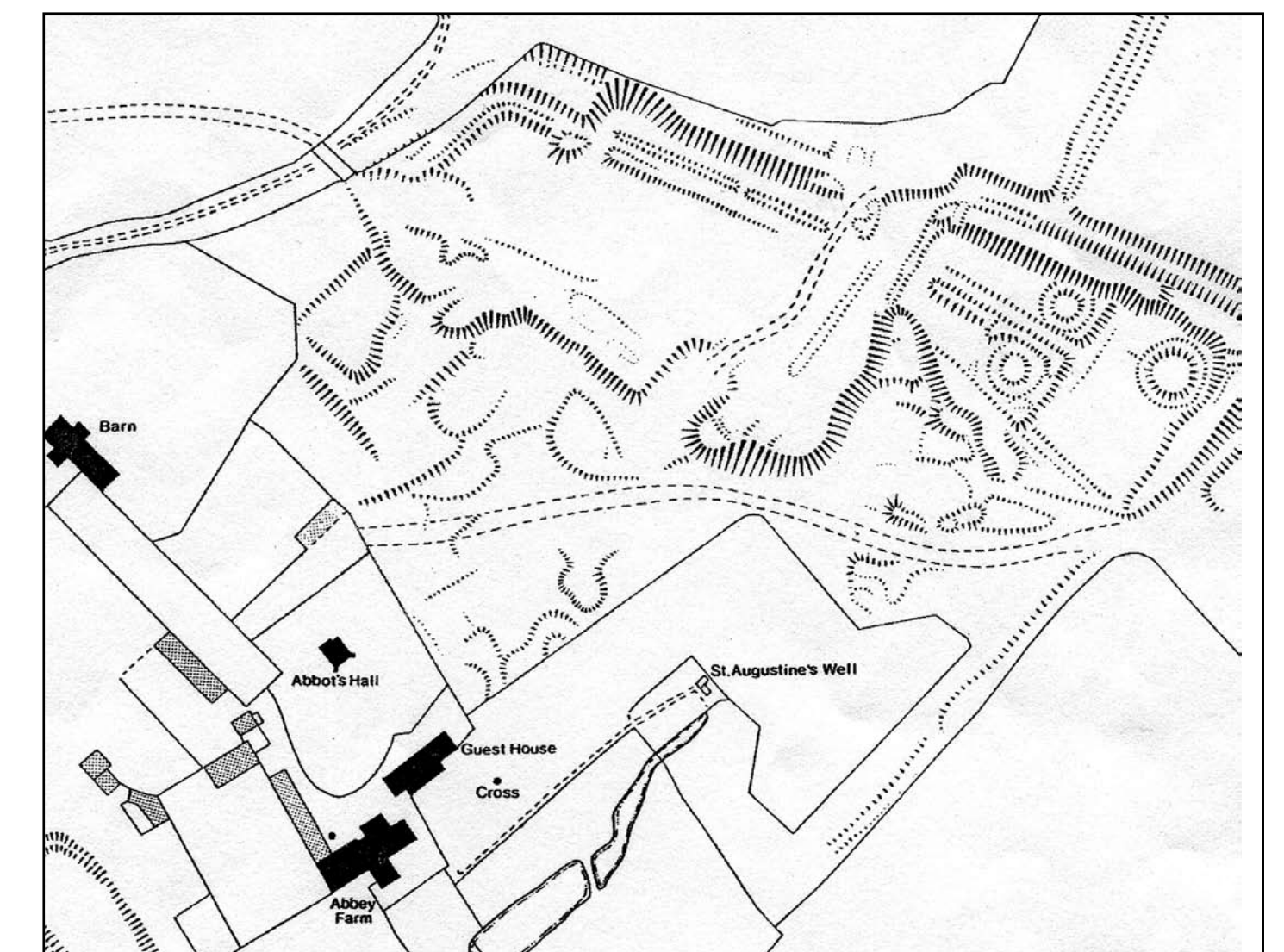
environment for the foundation in the 10<sup>th</sup> century of the rule of St Benedict with the monastic revival under King Edgar (957- 975). Edgar gave Aethelmaer, one of his ministers, the task of supervising the new monastery in Cerne. It is suggested that Aethelmaer, a young man in his twenties, may have inherited the fledgling abbey from an unknown kinsman. In any event by 987 the monastery was up and running with a post dated charter to prove it!

Income of Dorset's Abbeys

	<u>1086</u>	<u>1291</u>	<u>1535</u>
Cerne	£160	£177	£575
Milton	£91	£136	£665
Abbotsbury	£69	£95	£401
Sherborne	£61	£136	£682

After its foundation the Abbey continued to grow and prosper although its relative size as measured by its income, changed as we can see from these surveys over 500 years. The Abbey was a significant landowner allowing it to create a monastery of some stature. This is apparent when we look at the outline of the Abbey as it currently exists.

The earthworks were probably the abbey's kitchen garden but since no excavation has taken place we can only guess.



*Cerne Abbey today*



# Abbey Guest House and South Gate House



*Abbey Guest House*

As a result of the Dissolution little of the monastery stands. The Guest House is the most substantial part of the Abbey remaining. It is believed to have been built by Abbot Vanne - elected 1458 and died 1471.

It would have been a significant building within the Benedictine Abbey since an important element of monastic service was to ensure that all travellers were made welcome.

The Guest House, it is said, sheltered Queen Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI and her young son in the spring of 1471. Landing at Weymouth on the very day Warwick had been defeated and the Lancastrian cause lost at Barnet, she and her young son came over the hills to Cerne and sought sanctuary within the Abbey walls to plot and later to be finally defeated by the Yorkists at the battle of Tewksbury(1471).



*Abbey Guest House oriel window*



*John Vanne's fireplace*

The Guest House has some outstanding features most particularly the oriel window. The fireplace from the Guest House on which is carved Abbot Vanne's crest is now in the house which has evolved around the original south gate.

The South Gate House has been in domestic use since the Dissolution. The core of the house is the original south gate to the Abbey and would have been the main entrance for the town from Abbey Street. Little is known of the house's origin but we can be confident it was constructed from materials from the Abbey.

By the 1570s the roof lead, the stonework and all the Abbey's main features had been removed for constructing the South Gate House and other buildings in the village. Indeed some features are also to be found in St Mary's Church – do look at the village and church history there.



*Original south gate house door hinges*



*Abbey Street*

It seems likely that Abbey Street was the commercial centre of the town with shops and trades servicing the Abbey, the town and the Cerne Valley. Looking after the Abbey's land - some 16,000 acres - would have been quite a task.

In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century the South Gate House was largely reconstructed and underwent further restoration in the 1950s for which a Civic Trust Award was granted in 1959.



*South Gate House*



# Abbot's Porch and Barns

You are now standing under the Abbot's Porch, a three storey



*The Abbot's Porch*

entrance to the Abbot's Hall built by Abbot Thomas Sam elected 1497 and died 1509. Around its magnificent two storey oriel window can be seen panels enclosing the shields of arms and rebuses of Abbot Sam, Bishop Hugh Oldham of Exeter and other benefactors.

Above the entrance itself were the living quarters for the abbot. These rooms are where the abbot would have lived, studied and received visitors, with

space enough for a library; perhaps holding the Book of Cerne, but certainly the manuscripts which became scattered in 1539 following the Dissolution.

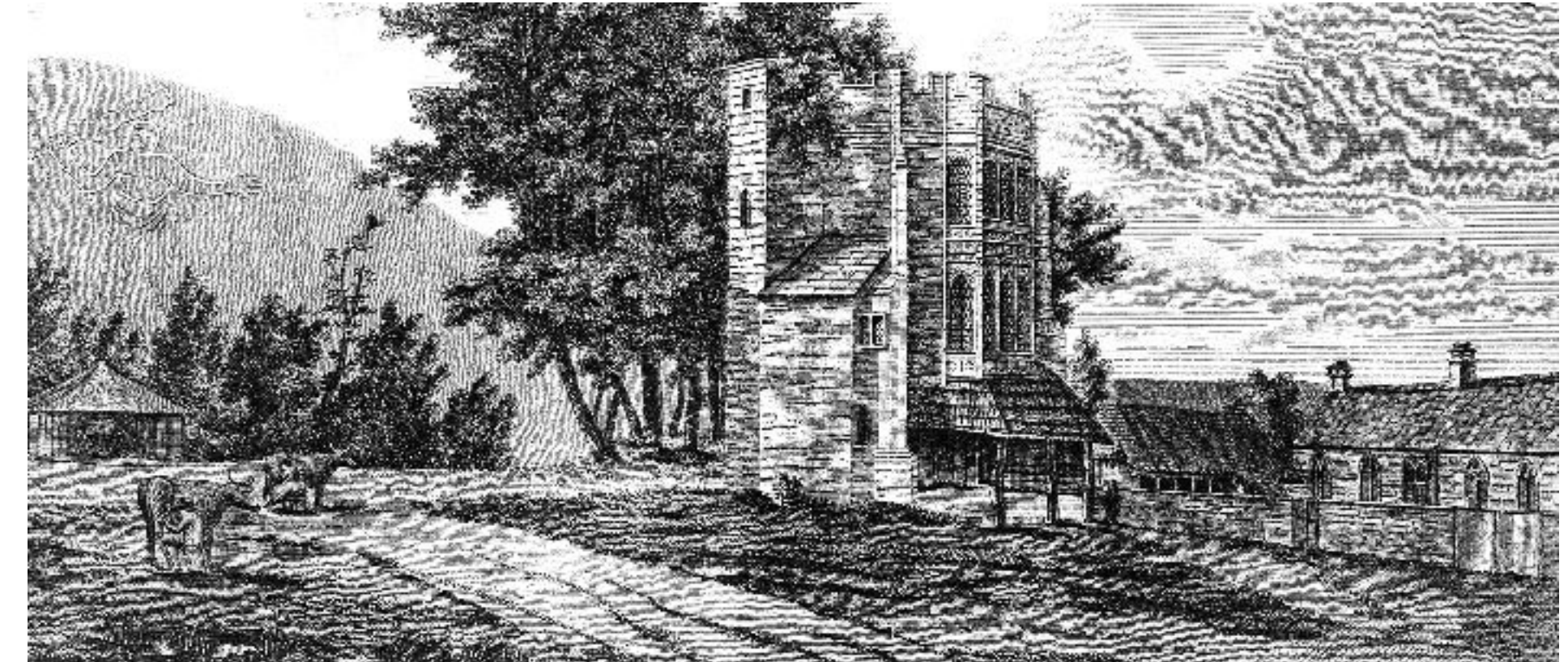
Just above this panel and to its left is a “spy hole” used by the porter to monitor who was going in or out! The abbot's entrance to the monastery was the nearby North Gate from which “all convenient high waies” radiated. The South Gate at the end of Abbey Street was normally kept locked and portered.



*Shields on oriel window*

After the Dissolution the porch was left standing but fell into decline to become part of the farm buildings. It was in the 1990s that the roof was finally replaced with the building restored to the state you see today.

The Abbey, as an extensive land owner, would have needed to store whatever it farmed and the tithes it received.



*The Abbey Porch and Guest House after the Dissolution*

Close to the Abbey about 100 yards north of here stands a barn, probably 15<sup>th</sup> century, now converted to a private house. It would have been well situated to store the daily needs of the Abbey and easily accessible via Kettle bridge.



*Kettle Bridge*

The main Abbey barn, however, was the Tithe Barn situated some distance from the Abbey to the south west. Built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century of knapped flint with ashlar buttresses



*The Tithe Barn*

it was once a similar size to the barn at Abbotsbury. You will find the Tithe Barn on the Heritage Trail. It is now a private house so can only be viewed from a distance.



# Abbots and some history

A long drawn out process took place over a decade, leading to the final closure of Cerne Abbey in 1539. At the Dissolution, Cerne Abbey was still an important monastery in Dorset. Its possessions covered 25 villages and towns and it was responsible for the spiritual life of four parishes.

As the move towards Dissolution gathered pace commissioners sought out monastic abuse on behalf of Thomas Cromwell (Minister to Henry VIII). At Cerne, however, they had no need to search since during 1535 a long list of complaints was sent directly to Cromwell by a disgruntled monk of Cerne, William Christchurch.

## ***Complaints against the abbot, Thomas Corton, 1535***

- *For keeping concubines in the cellars of the abbey, and especially one Joan Postell or Bakars.*
- *For letting the church and lands go to ruin.*
- *For wasting the goods of the monastery on his concubines and children and giving them great gifts.*
- *For giving sumptuous gifts to a son he had by a former concubine Joan Gardeners, by whom he also had a daughter, now dead.*
- *For maintaining another son called Harry, whom he begat on Alice Roberts "to the great slander of our religion" in the town of Cerne.*
- *He had a man child by one Edith, servant to Nicholas Foway.*
- *He openly solicits honest women in the town and elsewhere to have his will of them.*
- *His concubines sit at table with him.*
- *His brother and others of his kindred bear rule in the monastery, to the disquiet of the monks.*
- *The abbot does not keep obits and doles.*
- *He allows two of his monks who daily haunt queens to celebrate mass without confession.*
- *He allows some of the monks to play at cards all night and celebrate mass in the morning.*
- *He has abolished some masses.*
- *He allows women to stay with the brethren from noon to evensong.*
- *He has several times imprisoned William Christchurch for writing and speaking against him.*
- *He expelled William Christchurch from the monastery and sent him to the prior of Monmouth where he was very ill handled.*

The complaints are directed particularly at Abbot Thomas Corton and some of the senior monks.

It is not easy to decide how much reliance to place on William Christchurch. He obviously felt a strong sense of injustice, but Thomas Corton had been Abbot at Cerne since 1524 and it is difficult to believe that he had been so energetic or indiscreet as is suggested.

We know nothing of what happened to Brother William except that he did not appear on the list of pensioners when the Abbey was dissolved!

## ***ABBOTS OF CERNE***

*Aelfric, appointed AD 987, from Winchester*  
*Aelfric Puttoc, occurs 1023*  
*Aithelmus, occurs 1085*  
*Haimo, deposed 1105 for simony (buying or selling pardons)*  
*William, occurs 1121*  
*Bernard, became Abbot of Burton 1160*  
*Robert occurs 1166*  
*Denis(Dionysius) resigned 1220 re-elected 1220*  
*William de Hungerford, el 1232*  
*Richard de Surwell, el 1244, d 1260*  
*Philip de Blokesworth, el 1260*  
*Thomas de Eddlesbury, el 1274*  
*Gilbert de minterne. El 1296, d 1312*  
*Ralph de Cerne. el 1312*  
*Richard de osmington, el 1324*  
*Stephen Sherrard, el 1356*  
*Thomas Sewale. el 1361. d 1382*  
*Robert Symondsbury, el 1382*  
*John Wede. el 1421, d 1427*  
*John Winterborne, el 1427, d 1436*  
*John Godmanston, el 1436, d 1451*  
*William Cattistoke. el 1451, d 1454*  
*John Helyer, el 1454, resigned 1458*  
*John Vane, el 1458. d 1471*  
*Roger Bemyster, el 1471, d 1497*  
*Thomas Sam, el 1497, d 1509*  
*Robert Westbury. el 1510, d 1524*  
*Thomas Corton, el 1524, surrendered his Abbey 1539*



*John Tregonwell by Henry Hopper Meyer*

In spite of attempts by Thomas Corton to keep the Abbey open it was surrendered to John Tregonwell, one of Cromwell's commissioners, on 15 March 1539 on behalf of the Crown. John Tregonwell was later to acquire the buildings and estates of the Benedictine abbey at Milton Abbas and establish himself as a Dorset gentleman.



# Dissolution and the Book of Cerne



The Protestant Reformation was an earthquake in Europe's political history. It was probably the largest transfer of wealth between social orders in European society before the French Revolution. In England it combined elements of a princely Reformation from above with a more popular Reformation from below.

Before the 1530s the Church in England, as part of the Roman Catholic Church of Europe, was subordinate to the Pope. Henry VIII decided to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon who had failed to give him a male heir but the reigning Pope Clement VII refused to annul the marriage. In 1539 this forced Henry to separate England from the Roman Catholic Church. He declared himself supreme Head of the Church of England and denied the right of any foreign countries or monarchs to interfere in the affairs of his Church.



*Henry VIII*

The Dissolution created the biggest change in land ownership since the Norman Conquest. A large part of England's wealth was taken out of the hands of the Church allowing the gentry to take a more important role in the kingdom's affairs.

In reality Henry wanted power and money and this is exactly what the demise of the monasteries gave him. Between 1536 and 1547 he received over £1 million, allowing him to build defences against the French and to campaign against Scotland. At a local level the effect was immediate and the impact dramatic. In Cerne the buildings and lands were leased by the Crown to a succession of different people, all of whom sought to make a quick profit.

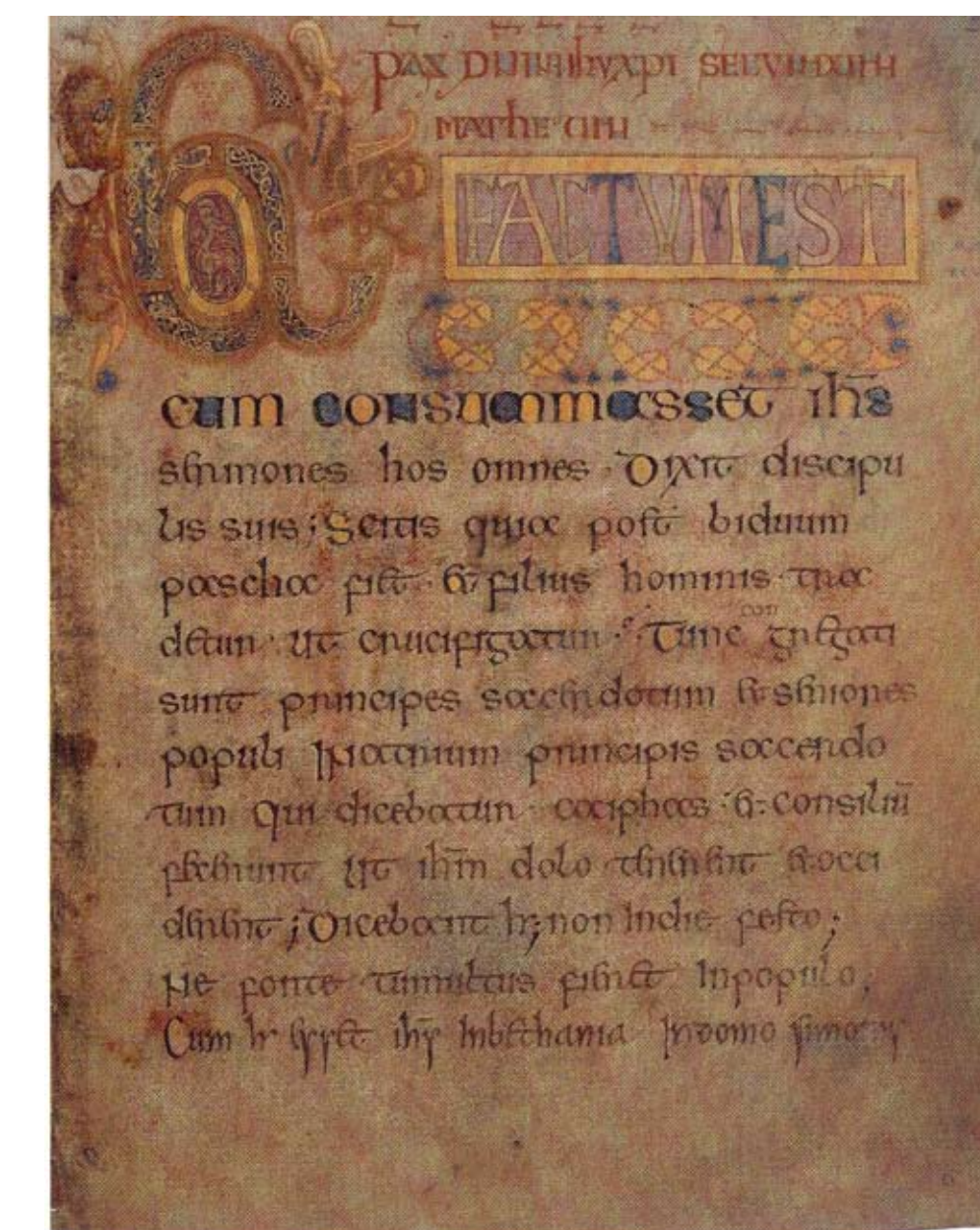
The fine architecture which survives in the Guest House and Abbot's Porch gives some indication of what the rest of the buildings must have been like.

At the Dissolution the Abbey library was dispersed but the Book of Cerne survived. Whilst its name anchors it to Cerne, in reality it gained its name from Cerne Abbey library manuscripts that bound an Anglo Saxon prayer book belonging to the Bishop of Lichfield between 818 and 830. It is this which is of the most significance. The first indication of its provenance is its presence in the library of John Moore (1646-1715) Bishop of Norwich and Ely. However there is no indication as to where it came from and manuscripts from the Cerne Abbey library are now to be found in Oxford, Cambridge and London.



*The Book of Cerne*

By 1715 Bishop Moore had collected 1,790 manuscripts in his library of 30,560 volumes which he sold to George I for 6,000



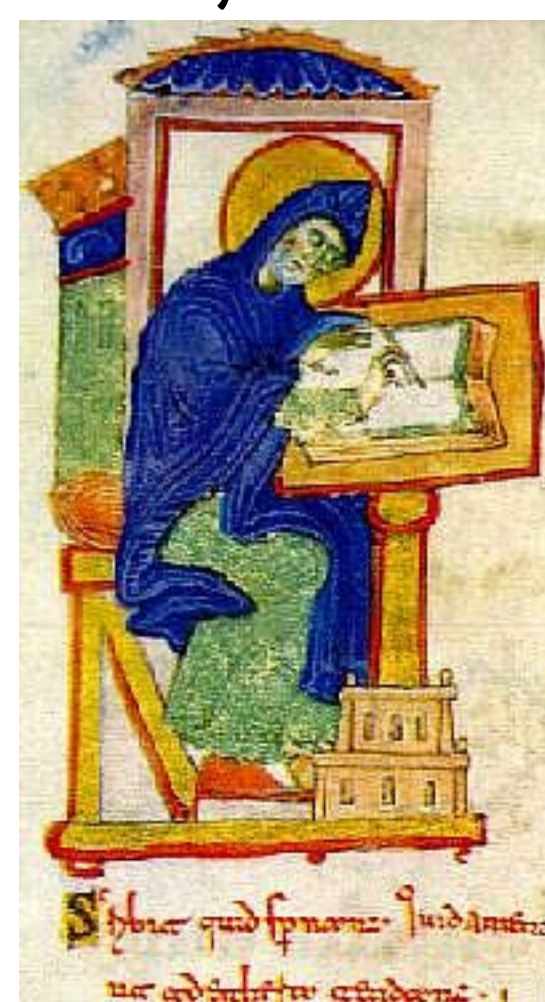
guineas who in turn presented it to Cambridge. It is here the Book of Cerne is now kept. As we can see, the prayer book illuminations are striking, but it is very unlikely that Cerne had any of the expertise to produce such a work. The stylistic evidence of script and decoration points firmly away from Wessex and towards Mercia whilst the Cerne manuscripts were not added until well into the modern period.



# The Benedictine Movement and Aelfric

Amongst the most prominent monastic orders of the West are the Carthusians, the Cistercians and the Benedictines. St Benedict of Nursia (c480-540) gave Western monasticism its permanent form. Benedict's day was a balance between work and worship, recreation and common life and between action and contemplation. These ensured the three virtues of monastic life, namely obedience, silence and humility. Each would contribute to the building of a community life and the sanctification of the individual monk.

It would be easy though to think of monasteries in merely family terms. They also had a social and indeed national importance. Society in Charlemagne's empire and Alfred's kingdom was divided



St Benedict

into those who fought, those who worked and those who prayed. King Edgar's foundation charter of the New Minster, Winchester in 966 clearly reveals this outlook:

*“the abbot is armed with spiritual weapons and supported by a troop of monks anointed with the dew of heavenly graces. They fight together in the strength of Christ with the sword of the spirit against the aery wiles of the devil. They defend the king and clergy of the realm against the onslaughts of their invisible enemies.”*

The monasteries were the centres of the highest cultural achievements in a society whose immense majority was illiterate. They provided the best writers and scholars not only in Latin but in the vernacular.

One of these was Aelfric (955 - 1022) who provided an organised body of writings, Bible translations and paraphrases, lives of saints and sermons which continued to be used well after the Norman conquest by clergy up and down the country.

The place where he wrote most of his books was here in Cerne as the first Abbot of Cerne Abbey.

Several of “Aelfric's Colloquy” have survived. One was probably used for teaching in the monastery school which would have included some of the villagers as pupils. Written between 992 and 1002 his Colloquy is warm, lively and revealing - qualities that have not lost their appeal. Its purpose was



to lead the boys to speak Latin and it considers different people in contemporary society. One person is a monk, another a fisherman, a ploughman, a hunter and so on. Each tells the others about their lives, their motivation and attitudes. Finally a wise counsellor is introduced who is asked which of the occupations is best. The counsellor concludes:

*“Whatever you are, whether priest, monk, peasant or soldier, practise yourself in this and be what you are because it is a disgrace and shame for a man not to be willing to be that which he is and that which he ought to be.”*

Aelfric was unusual in having a consistent and long term plan addressed to different readers – clergy, monks and laity. His Catholic Homilies offered to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric (990 – 994), show Cerne contributing to the wider needs of the Church as a whole. Much of his writing remains as relevant today as when it was written: *“A patient man is more excellent than a strong one; he who governs his mind is better than he who conquers a city.”*

*This exhibition has been created as a result of a grant from:*

