



Members of the Heritage Partnership close to the site of the chapel of St Edmund founded by King Cnut in 1020

## 2020 Millennium Celebrations and Future Projects

2020 is an important year for the Abbey of St Edmund because it is the 1,000th anniversary of the foundation of the Benedictine Abbey by King Cnut in 1020 AD. A town-wide Abbey of St Edmund 2020 Millennium Celebrations Partnership is planning a programme of millennium celebrations from May to November, including mounting an exhibition in Moyses's Hall Museum, organising a conference to explore the abbey story and staging a Spectacle of Light finale.

The Heritage Partnership is part of the 2020 Partnership and is assisting with these activities to mark this once in a lifetime anniversary. It is also planning to seek funding for a series of projects, including:

- improving the presentation and interpretation of the Abbey with a new visitor leaflet and map, a better welcome at the Abbey Gate and a digital guide to supplement the new website
- commissioning a Master Plan, Interpretation Plan and Visitor Market Assessment to establish a strategic framework for developing projects across the whole heritage area
- finding out more about the Abbey by completing the reports of recent archaeological excavations and commissioning further research
- commissioning a geophysical survey of the whole area starting with the east end of the ruins of the Abbey Church including the original 'stone church rotunda' built by King Cnut in 1020 AD
- undertaking repairs and reinstating regular maintenance of the historic fabric to catch up with the present backlog starting with the east end of the ruins of the Abbey Church
- digitising historic records of the Abbey for general access and developing a digital reconstruction of the Abbey Church and the surrounding monastery at the height of their medieval influence
- establishing an activities programme and an education programme to involve local people and visitors
- improving access, circulation, visitor signs and landscaping around the whole area
- appointing a project manager to coordinate project implementation.

**To read about the Abbey of St Edmund and the Heritage Partnership, to find out how you can get involved and to watch an introductory video, visit: <https://www.abbeyofstedmund.org.uk>**

St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
A beacon of faith, hope and love in Suffolk



West Suffolk  
Council



*Deepening public understanding of the life and times of St Edmund and the Medieval Abbey and encouraging people to experience the spiritual, historical and archaeological significance of the Abbey of St Edmund in the modern world.*



ABBEY OF ST EDMUND  
HERITAGE PARTNERSHIP

# Introducing The Abbey of St Edmund



'Abbey of St Edmund before the Reformation' by W. K. Hardy, c.1883 (West Suffolk Heritage Service)

January 2020



# St Edmund - England's Patron Saint

The Abbey of St Edmund celebrates the thousandth anniversary of its foundation in 2020. Were it not for St Edmund and his devotion to his Christian beliefs, the abbey would not have become such an important feature in the landscape and history of Bury St Edmunds.

In AD 869, Edmund, King of the East Angles, was killed by the Danes who shot him with arrows and then beheaded him. According to legend, his head was found guarded by a wolf. Within a few decades his body was brought to a timber church on this site.

After the new abbey was built, the body was translated to a splendid shrine. The cult of St Edmund grew and he was regarded as the patron saint of England. Possession of St Edmund's body led to the abbey becoming one of the major pilgrimage sites in western Europe. It also led to the town being called Bury St Edmunds.

After the dissolution of the abbey, the shrine was stripped of its jewels and decoration: Henry VIII's commissioners reported that it was 'very cumbersome to deface'. Nobody knows what became of St Edmund's body, but there is speculation that he may be buried in the abbey grounds.



The Great Churchyard Looking towards the Norman Tower, English School, c.1820 (West Suffolk Heritage Service)

## The Abbey of St Edmund

The Abbey of St Edmund was one of the largest, wealthiest and most important Benedictine abbeys in medieval England. Little is known about the early history of the abbey, but there was an Anglo-Saxon settlement on this site, and later documents say that it was called Beodricsworth. In around AD 1020, under the patronage of King Cnut or Canute, the shrine at Bury St Edmunds was re-founded as a Benedictine house. After the Norman Conquest, the abbey was rebuilt.

The royal veneration of Edmund was bound up with the origins and legitimacy of English kingship and so his shrine was particularly supported by medieval rulers. Every English king from William I to Henry VII visited the site and several Parliaments were held here. The medieval abbey was the setting for events of national importance. Perhaps the most celebrated occasion was in 1214, when the chronicler Roger of Wendover relates how a group of earls and barons met at the abbey, an event which led to the signing of Magna Carta.

The town of Bury St Edmunds grew up in the shadow of the abbey. The abbots laid out the streets and controlled the town and the surrounding area. Relations between town and abbey were often tense, occasionally erupting into riots as in 1327 when the abbey gate was burnt down and in 1381 when the Prior was killed.

The abbey was magnificent: in 1538, the antiquary John Leland wrote, 'A man who saw the abbey would say it was a city, so many gates, so many towers and a most stately church', but only a year later, the abbey was dissolved by King Henry VIII. The buildings were demolished and the dressed stone removed, leaving the misshapen flint core ruins that remain today. Only the beautiful Abbey Gate, Norman Tower and Abbot's Bridge offer some hint of the former splendour of the Abbey of St Edmund.

As the site of St Edmund's tomb and of the genesis of Magna Carta, the abbey gives Bury St Edmunds its identity as 'Shrine of a King, Cradle of the Law'.

# The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership



ABBEY OF ST EDMUND  
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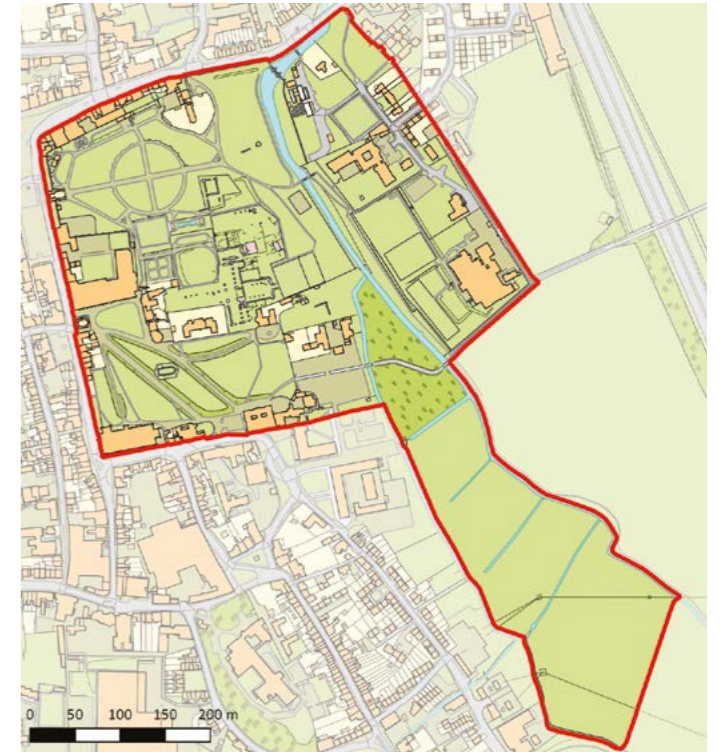
The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership brings together 18 organisations who have pledged to work together to care for, conserve and enhance the site known historically as the Abbey Precinct.

The Precinct covers an area of approximately 60 acres and encompasses the Abbey Gardens; St Edmundsbury Cathedral; The Great Churchyard; St Mary's Church; the former Eastgate Nursery; the Vinefields; The Crankles and No Man's Meadows. 21 grade 1 listed and 118 grade 2 listed buildings and structures are to be found within the confines of this historic religious enclave.

Since its formation in 2016, the Heritage Partnership has recruited over 30 individuals from partner organisations to prepare detailed plans. The long term aim is to deepen public understanding of the life and times of St Edmund and the Medieval Abbey and to encourage people to experience the spiritual, historical and archaeological significance of the Abbey of St Edmund in the modern world.

*The following organisations form the Partnership:*

- St Edmundsbury Cathedral
- West Suffolk Council
- Suffolk County Council
- Bury St Edmunds Town Council
- The Bury St Edmunds Society
- Bury St Edmunds Town Trust
- Bury St Edmunds Town Guides
- St Mary's Church
- St Edmund's Roman Catholic Church
- Historic England
- English Heritage Trust
- University of East Anglia
- University of Suffolk
- Suffolk Record Office
- Bury Past and Present Society
- Abbey Gardens Friends
- Bury Water Meadows Group
- River Lark Catchment Partnership



The project area (contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2018. OS Licence No. 100019675)

In the last three years, the Heritage Partnership has obtained funding from its partner organisations and heritage organisations to enable it to conduct two important studies: a Heritage Assessment by Dr Richard Hoggett and a Conservation Plan by Purcell. It has organised a highly successful conference to publicise the findings from these studies and has used them to construct a road map for the way ahead. The Heritage Partnership is also running community engagement events and visiting local schools and groups to publicise the 1,000th anniversary of the abbey's foundation.

You can download the **Heritage Assessment** and the **Conservation Plan** free of charge, read more about the **Heritage Partnership** and watch an introductory video at: <https://www.abbeyofstedmund.org.uk>



Ruins of the Abbey of St Edmund at Bury by Richard Godfrey, 1779 (West Suffolk Heritage Service)