

Steeple in a Landscape –
prominent church steeples in the
landscape of the north Lincolnshire
‘Marsh’.



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Steeple in a landscape – prominent church steeples in the medieval landscape of the north Lincolnshire Marsh.

The following is a revision of an article originally printed in Barton Civic Soc. annual Newsletter in 2008.

The Humber lowlands in the parishes of Barton, Barrow and Goxhill lie at the northern end of the coastal lowlands generally termed the Lincolnshire 'Marsh'. The O.S. Landranger sheet 113 (Grimsby) shows the 'Marsh' to be five to six miles wide in the Somercotes/Saltfleet area while along the foothills of the dip slope of the Lincolnshire Wolds, on or about the 20m. contour, stand a series of spring-line villages between (and including) Tetney and Manby.¹ In the vicinity of the spring-line stand a series of moated sites denoting (usually) significant medieval domestic locations.

Further south, the OS. sheet 122 (Skegness) shows that between Mablethorpe and Chapel St. Leonards the coastal 'Marsh' narrows then widens again to five to six miles with again a series of moated sites on or near the 10m. contour, with evidence in local names of medieval or early-modern land reclamation e.g. Two Mile Bank and West Bank. Between Skegness and Wainfleet St. Mary the 'Marsh' widens further and begins to blend into the Fens of Holland district. East of the A52 may be seen a succession of relatively modern clay banks with the reclaimed land criss-crossed by a grid-plan of drainage channels and crossed by canalised lower river courses such as those of the Rivers Steeping, Witham and Welland.

The site and situation of the motte and bailey Norman castle site at Barrow Haven mirrors the ones further south at Castle Carlton and Old Bolingbroke.

In the Middle Ages the steeples of churches in the spring-line communities would have been prominent in the landscape from the perspective of the reclaimed land and from the coastal waters beyond.² However along the narrowing coastal 'Marsh' inland of the south

¹ The width of the 'Marsh' is that of the lowland between high water/clay bank and the 10m. contour inland.

² For a more detailed study of church steeples as aids to navigation in the Humberside region see *Landmarks and Beacons*.

Humber clay bank not only would the steeples of the nearby spring-line churches have been landmarks but also those of the north Humber bank so that here on the 'Marsh' one was surrounded by ecclesiastical landmarks just as might be the case in more inland locations.³

In Goxhill parish the estuarine lowland ('Marsh') was common land prior to parliamentary enclosure in 1775 (as was also the case in Barrow and Barton parishes). This common land was in turn divided into four named areas (see Russell, 1984) and would have had a varied ecology (see *The South Humber Coastal Lowlands – a Landscape Interpretation*). In this area the word 'Chapel' figures in a number of names e.g. Chapel Farm which stands beside Chapel Field Road, the most easterly of the 60 feet (wide) post enclosure roads and the nearest to East Halton Beck, the parish boundary. Chapel Field Road passes through land that before 1775 formed Chapel Field, one of Goxhill's four ancient open fields. Therefore the denomination 'chapel' is pre-modern – the first known recorded use of the name appears to have been in the late 17th century.⁴ Perhaps in Goxhill the word relates to a one-time chapel-of-ease in this large parish, perhaps to a one-time private chapel (Roman Catholic?). Maybe the term relates in some way to Goxhill Hall, a surviving medieval building comprising a first-floor hall above a groined under-croft and commonly misnamed a 'Priory' (see Pevsner 1989, 313 and Cook and Border, 2007, 57-89). Perhaps the term relates in some way to connections between Goxhill and the great Augustinian Priory at Bridlington (see Neave, 2000, chs. 3 and 4) or to nearby Thornton Abbey (see later).

³ The spires of the Fenlands are a classic example of a regional band of similar church architecture.

⁴ Goxhill did have a meeting hall for a branch of Old Nonconformity and part of the building survives on Howe Lane. Chapel Farm in the parish of Barton is still the name of an ex farmhouse standing near the old Brigg Road, here the name seems to have been coined as a result of the earliest part of the building complex having been built in a neo-gothic style. There is no record of the building being used as a place of communal worship.



Fig. 1 All Saints church, Goxhill, viewed from the north.

Of course, if considering churches as landmarks then it is the steeple that is the most visible part of the building. All Saints church, Goxhill has an imposing west tower (see Fig. 1). Built in the 15th century, its fine-grained, smooth-faced limestone ashlar building blocks make it a focal point in the north Lincolnshire landscape, particularly when bathed in sunlight. Similarly, when viewed from the north Humber bank Goxhill's church tower catches the eye in a lowland landscape with few other identifiable features to the naked eye. Whether from the West Riding or from Newbald in the East Riding the stone would have been transported into and along the Humber by sailing craft to Goxhill Haven, or up East Halton Beck, then overland. Such a level of investment would testify to parish of considerable wealth (see Cook and Border, 2007, 90-111).

Goxhill church stands close to the 10m. contour, a common location for medieval Humberside churches. Here they were above the wetlands of the Marsh and visible (in clear weather) as aids to navigation in the Estuary (see *Landmarks and Beacons*). All Saints church, Barrow commands a similar location (see Fig. 2). With a west tower built of freestone All Saints is also a striking feature in the landscape. Even today the west towers of Goxhill and Barrow churches are prominent in the landscape when viewed from north or south banks of the Humber, especially when the west towers are reflecting sunlight.



Fig. 2 All Saints church, Barrow on Humber, viewed from the south-east.

To the east, south and west of Goxhill church there was a density of medieval church towers of approximately 1:1.75 miles 'as the crow flies'.⁵ These would not all have been visible from ground level but the crossing tower of the church of the Augustinian canons at Thornton would have been prominent (see Fig. 3). Founded in 1139 the abbey was to acquire great wealth through land ownership and the trade in wool.⁶ The 40 feet square crossing tower was a product of a rebuilding programme that spanned the late 13th century to mid 14th century and as such probably reflected the, then fashionable, late Geometric or Decorated styles of architecture. Built mainly of magnesian limestone, quarried in the Tadcaster area and transported down the River Ouse into the Humber, the majestic crossing tower must have stood proud in the landscape.

⁵ All Saints, Barrow on Humber at 1.75 miles, St. Mary and St. Peter's, Barton on Humber at 4.25 miles, St. Lawrence, Thornton Curtis at 1.5 miles, St. Peter's, East Halton at 2.75 miles, St. Denis, North Killingholme and Thornton Abbey at 1 mile distant.

⁶ The monastic site with abbey church, cloistral range of buildings and many functional outbuildings spanned an 80 acre site, this, for example, larger than that of Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire.

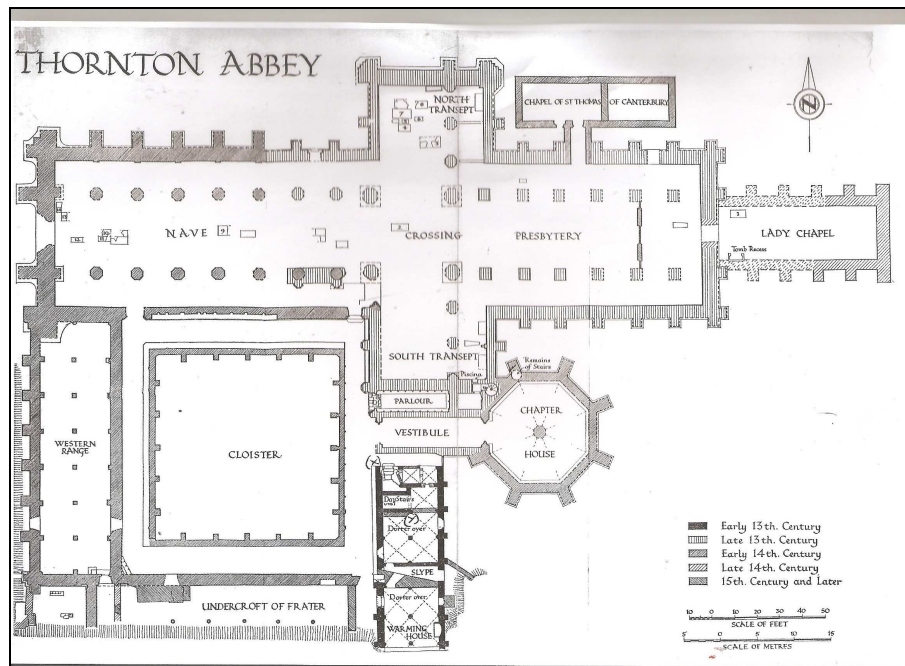


Fig. 3 Architectural plan of church and cloistral range at Thornton Abbey.

Because of the lowland landscape on both north and south banks of the Humber estuary even today it is possible to gain glimpses from Goxhill village of Paull and Hedon churches and of Holy Trinity church, Hull where gaps in the hedgerows permit. As the waters of the Humber are not visible at ground level inland church towers on the north bank would have appeared ‘across the fields’, especially from viewpoints on the ‘Marsh’ proper. A point such as Salt Marsh Farm, today beside Ferry Road, was, prior to Enclosure in the 1770s, part of the common land known as ‘The Salt Marsh’ (see Russell and Clarke) and was beside one of two streams that then meandered across the common before flowing into Goxhill Haven. From there the pattern of clearly visible church towers was dominated by those on the north bank of the Humber, indeed to those working or squatting on the common these landmarks would have been more prominent than their parish church.⁷

Two such north bank landmarks as seen from the north Lincolnshire lowlands were the west towers of St Peter’s, Drypool and St. Giles, Marfleet, both long gone. St. Peter’s, Drypool would have been visible

⁷ Distance of medieval church towers from Salt Marsh Farm; All Saints, Goxhill 1.75 miles, Holy Trinity, Hull 2.5 miles, St Peter’s, Drypool 3 miles, All Saints, Barrow on Humber 3 miles, St. Andrew and St Mary’s church, Paull 3.5 miles, Marfleet church 3.75 miles, St. Augustine’s, Hedon 5 miles and the churches at Barton on Humber 5 miles.

from the south between the crossing towers of Holy Trinity, Hull and St. Augustine's, Hedon – nearer the former. An illustration of the medieval church just prior to its demolition in 1822 shows a squat two-stage west tower and Norman north door (see Poulson 1841, 341 and Fig. 4) while a medieval 'bird's eye' map of the lower course of the river Hull appears to show a three-stage west tower. The post-1822 church in the village of Drypool was much damaged by bombing in the Hull Blitz of 1942 (by then part of the City of Hull), in 1952 the three-stage tower was still standing but the ruin and tower were demolished in the mid 1950s. The then churchyard is now a small public park.

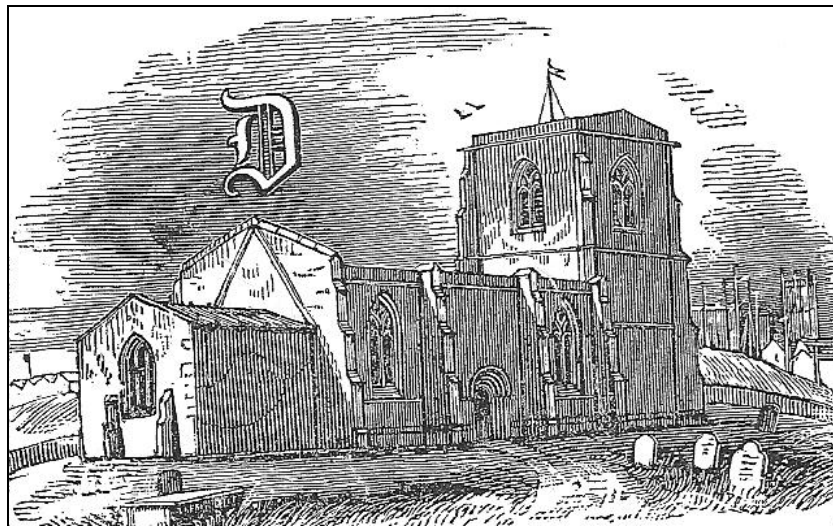


Fig. 4 The medieval church of St. Peter's, Drypool (see Poulson, 1841, 341).

Between Drypool and Hedon stood the medieval church at Marfleet serving a hamlet surrounded by estuarine lowlands mostly tamed to provide grazing land for flocks of monastic sheep, this land separated from Humber tidal waters by modest clay banks. The present-day St. Giles church, Marfleet (across Hedon Road from King George Dock) was preceded, on a nearby site, by a Georgian church from 1793 to 1865, this in turn preceded by a medieval church first recorded in 1217 but no clear illustration of which survives (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 An enlargement of the representation of Marfleet church on Scott's navigational chart of the Humber published 1734, it then a chapel of ease in Paull parish. Many of the churches drawn on this chart seem true to what we know of them in the mid 18th century. If true of Marfleet's medieval church then it had a low west tower capped by a large pyramidal spire. Whether or not this is an accurate representation the church was clearly an aid to navigation as shown by the sight lines drawn.

Despite the presence of all the 19th and 20th century buildings that cluster the Hull skyline the crossing tower of Holy Trinity church remains prominent. The 150 feet high crossing tower, completed around 1500, has features visible to the naked eye when seen from Goxhill 'Marsh' on a clear day. These features include two tiers of three-light transom openings on each tower face, an open parapet and eight pinnacles (see Fig. 6). The earlier crossing tower may have been more in the style of Drypool church as it was supported by brick-built transepts dated to the mid 14th century. In the late Middle Ages the west tower of the nearby St. Mary's church, Lowgate, Hull may have vied with Holy Trinity for visual impact as evidence dates its then west tower to the 15th century. However, this tower fell in the 1520s, the present tower dating from 1697 and somewhat lost in today's skyline.



Fig. 6 Holy Trinity, Hull viewed from the south-east.

The perpendicular crossing tower of St. Mary and St. Andrew's church, Paull remains uncluttered by modern urban development although it has a backdrop of Saltend chemical works. The church's impact in the landscape benefits from its site on a post-glacial ridge, thus standing some 15m. above the waters of the Estuary (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Paull church viewed from the south-east.

Although on a lower site and three miles inland from the Humber bank the crossing tower of St. Augustine's, Hedon is prominent on the skyline. Here again a lofty, 128 feet high, 15th century freestone tower has two tiers of three-light openings, an open parapet and 16 pinnacles.

Surviving documentary evidence dates the start of the crossing tower's building programme to 1428 (see Fig. 8). Its predecessor would have been contemporary with much of the surviving church's fabric and thus Early English in style (St. Mary's, Barton has a fine west tower which was built in the Early English style of the 13th century).

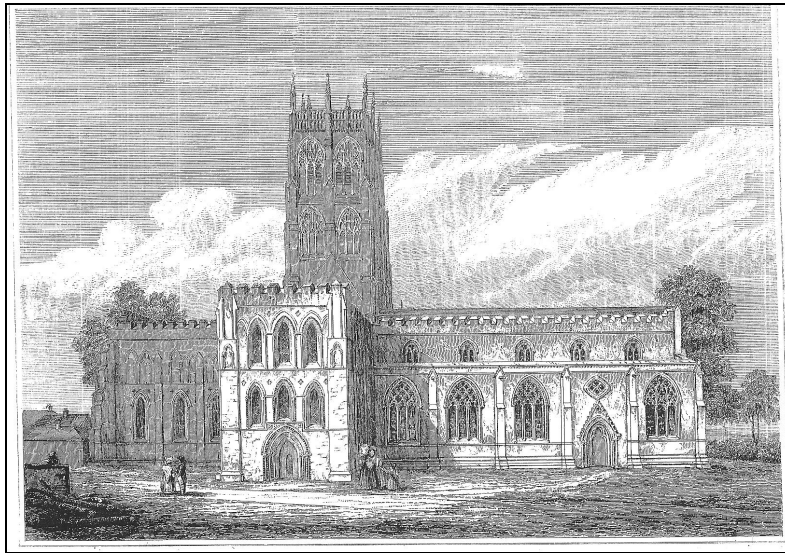


Fig. 8 Lithograph of St. Augustine's, Hedon 'as viewed from Market Hill' (Poulson, 1841,168).

Standing, then, on the saltmarsh of Goxhill 'Marsh' in the early 1500s one could have turned through 350 degrees and seen at least eight modern (then), majestic church towers breaking the horizon. Were these church authorities engaged in a contest of one-upmanship, were they expressing a commitment to their function as aids to navigation or was this simply a result of the prosperity of parishes bordering the Humber Estuary?

Throughout the Middle Ages the Humber was a highway for trade and transport and crossed by some local and one nationally important ferry - nevertheless, it was a political and physical divide. Although some brethren from Thornton Abbey would have regularly crossed from East Halton Beck to Paull to discuss matters of trade and landholding with monks from Meaux Abbey in west Holderness most would have stayed in the monastic complex or neighbouring parishes. Similarly some traders and high status travellers from Goxhill, Barrow and Barton might regularly have crossed the Humber but not most parishioners. Thus although the some north bank church towers stood within a similar

distance to their parish church for those working (or living) on the 'Marsh' their landmarks were destined to remain mysterious.⁸

Finally, 'seen and heard'. Certainly in still weather the church bells of all the churches here mentioned would have been audible to people on the coastal lowlands of north Lincolnshire. Late medieval church bells would have been tolled much more frequently than today as they had a number of secular as well as religious functions. Episodes of life, and death, for a number of north and south bank parishes would have been known to the commoners of Goxhill 'Marsh'.

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⁸ Distance of church towers from Salt Marsh Farm, Ferry Rd., Goxhill (in a straight line); Goxhill 2 miles, Holy Trinity, Hull 2.75 miles, Drypool 3 miles, Thornton Abbey 3 miles, Barrow on Humber 3.25 miles, Paull 3.75 miles, Marfleet 3.75 miles, Hedon 5 miles and Barton on Humber 5 miles.

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