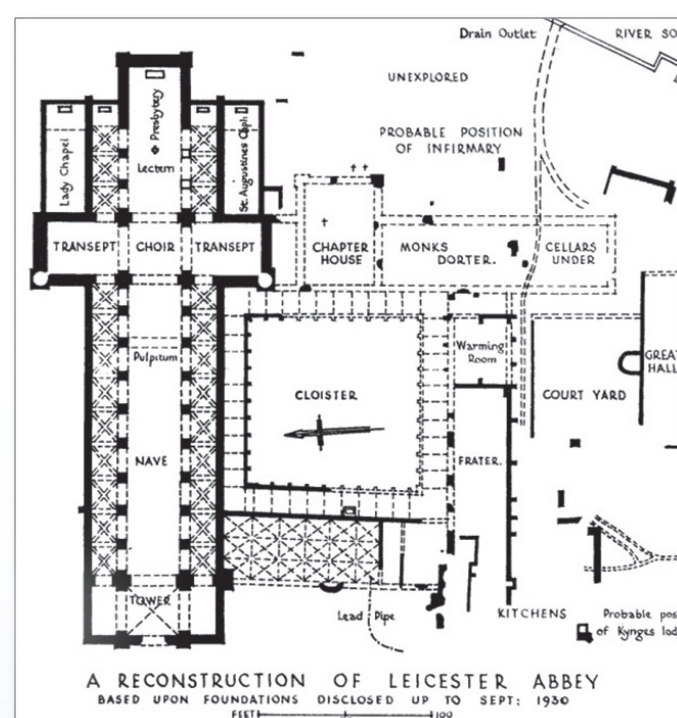


# THE ABBEY CHURCH



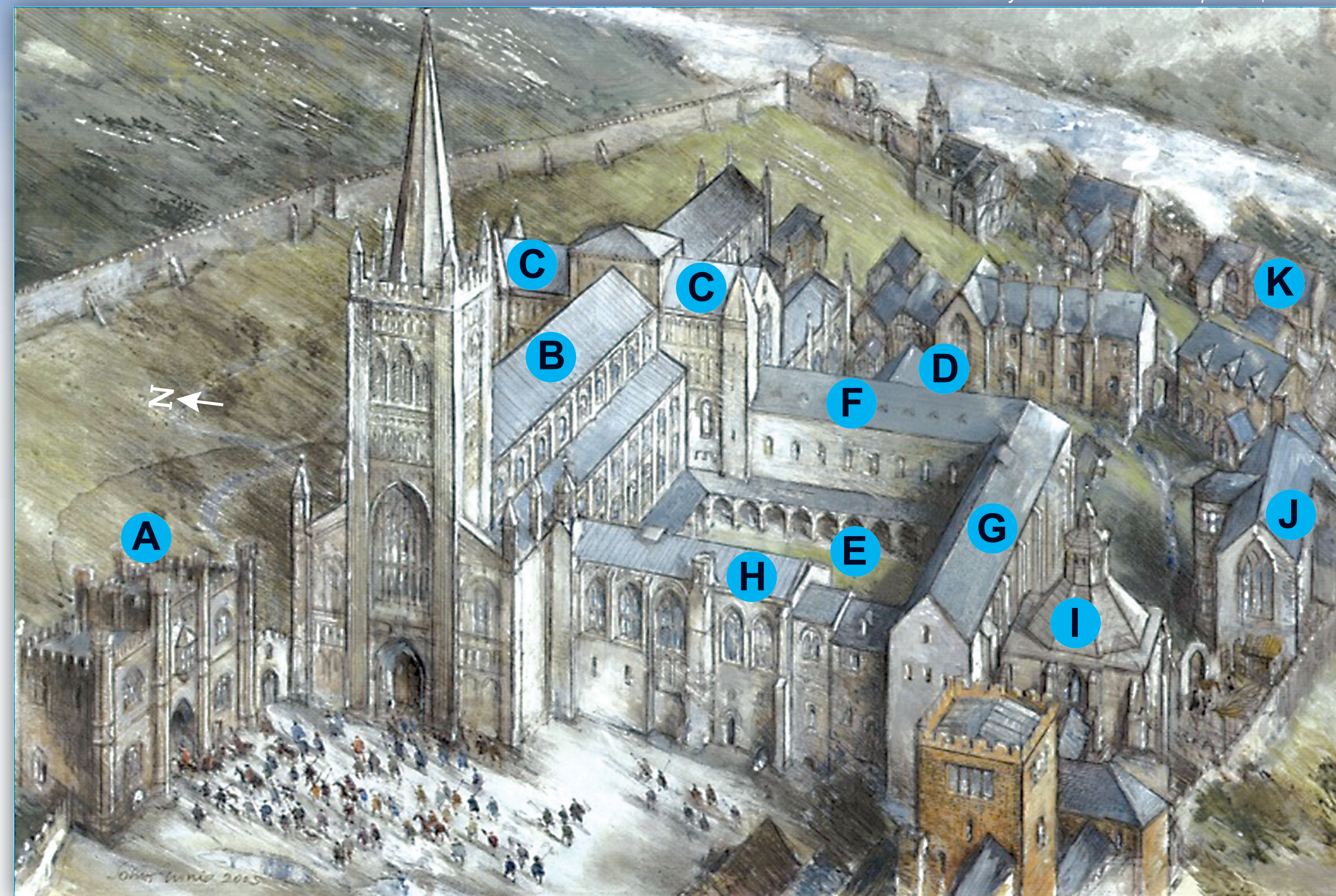
The Abbey of St Mary of the Meadows was founded in Leicester in about 1143 by the second Earl of Leicester, Robert le Bossu.

It became one of the wealthiest Augustinian abbeys in the country, but closed in 1538 when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and confiscated their lands and possessions. Within about thirty years, the church and most of the other buildings had been demolished and the lead, stone and tile was sold-off for re-use elsewhere.



Bedingfield's reconstruction of the abbey plan.

Whilst converting the overgrown abbey grounds into a public park in 1929-32, major excavations by the Leicester architect and archaeologist W.K. Bedingfield revealed the remains of the abbey church and the other main building ranges. These were then marked out in 1934 with the low walls that you see today to make the plan easier to understand.



Reconstruction of the abbey in the later medieval period (John Finnie).

The abbey church (**B**) was built in the shape of a cross in the 12th century and was orientated east to west, with a large tower at the west end. The arms of the cross – the 'transepts' (**C**) – extended each side of the north and south aisles. East of the transepts were large side chapels. The northern one was the Lady Chapel, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and by tradition, the burial place of Cardinal Wolsey. Out of favour with Henry VIII and under arrest, he died here in 1530 whilst journeying to London from the north. The southern chapel was probably dedicated to St Augustine.

Attached to the south wall of the church was the cloister (**E**), a square courtyard with covered walkways, surrounded by further buildings including the chapter house (**D**), dormitory (**F**), refectory (**G**) and west range (**H**). Beyond, were the kitchen (**I**), guest hall (**J**) and infirmary (**K**). More information about these buildings can be found on other boards around the site.



13th-century enamel incense boat lid from Leicester Abbey.

The 400th anniversary of Wolsey's death being commemorated in 1930.



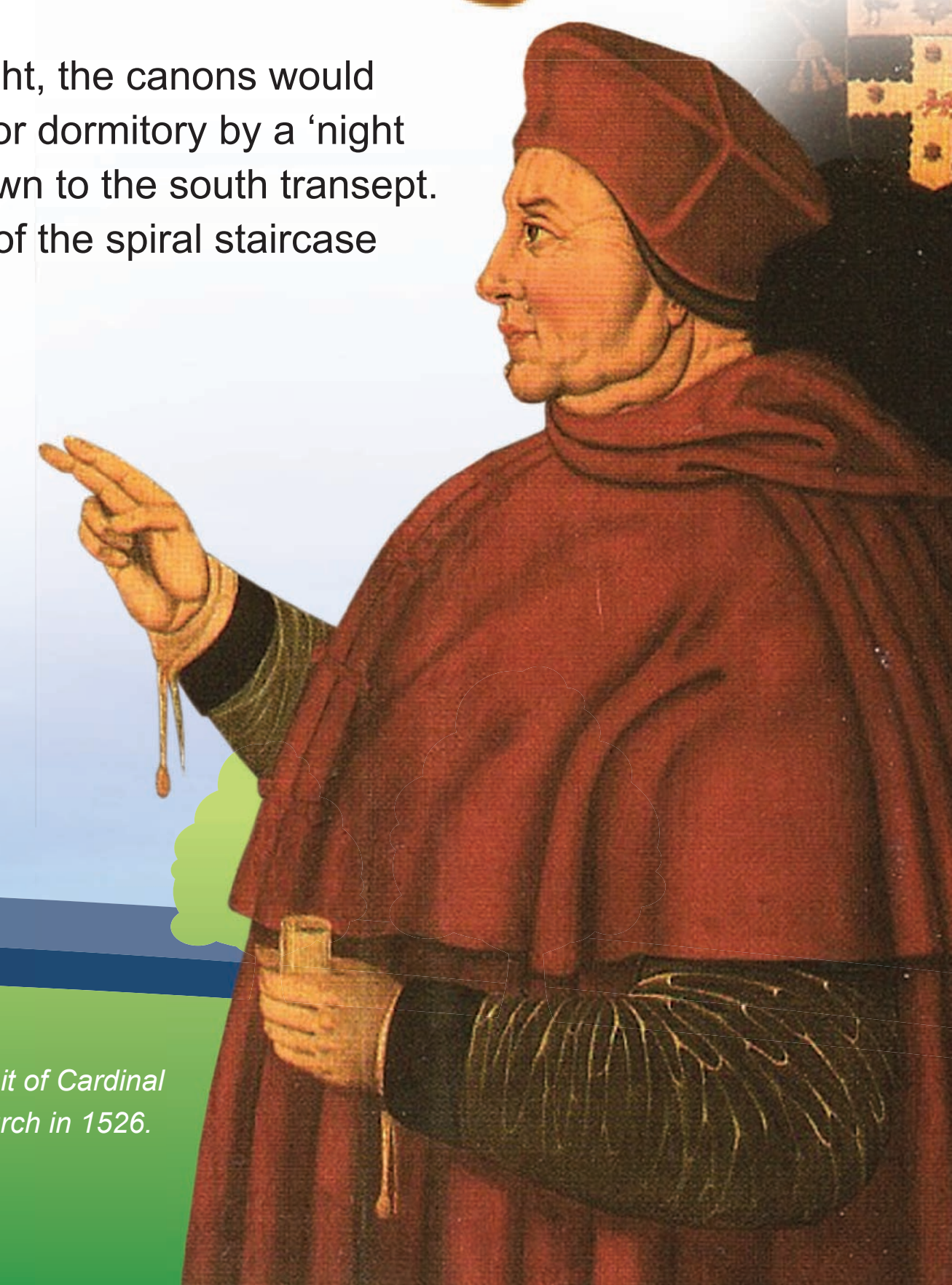
Leicester Abbey housed a community of Augustinian priests known as 'canons' who devoted themselves to prayer, learning, teaching and the care of the sick.

Monastic life was ruled by regular services in the church throughout the day and night and periods of work, prayer, study and meditation during the day. Holy Days, Christmas, Easter, Saint's days, and periods of fasting during Lent, would all be marked by special services or Masses in the abbey.



Medieval floor tiles from Leicester Abbey.

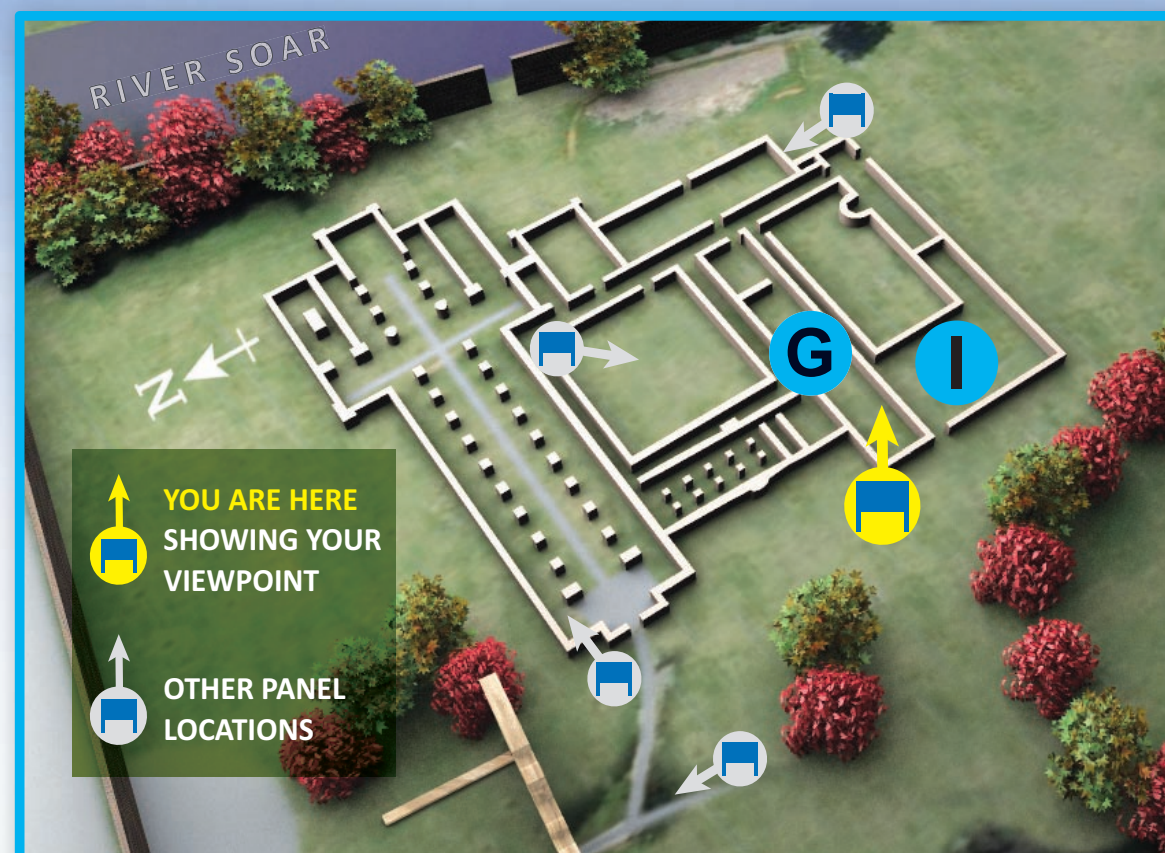
For services at night, the canons would leave their first-floor dormitory by a 'night stair' which led down to the south transept. The circular base of the spiral staircase may still be seen.



Sampson Strong's portrait of Cardinal Wolsey at Christ Church in 1526.



# THE KITCHEN AND REFECTORY



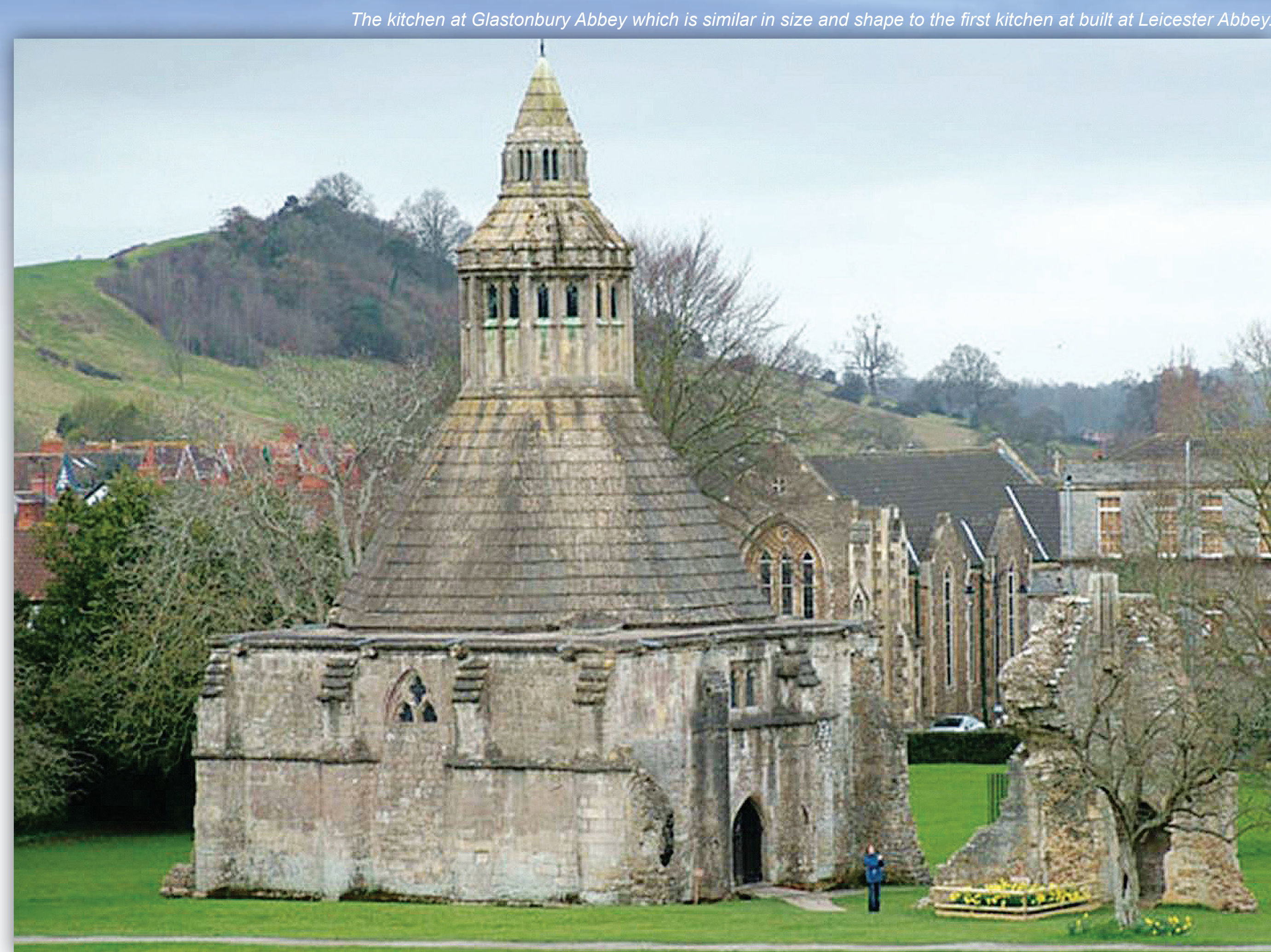
The community at Leicester Abbey ate together at regular times in the refectory (**G**) – a large rectangular building entered from the south cloister walk. Meals usually took place in silence whilst listening to religious texts read aloud by one of the canons (priests).

Food would have been served through a hatch from the kitchen (**I**), the remains of which were discovered on the south side of the refectory during excavations between 2002 and 2005.

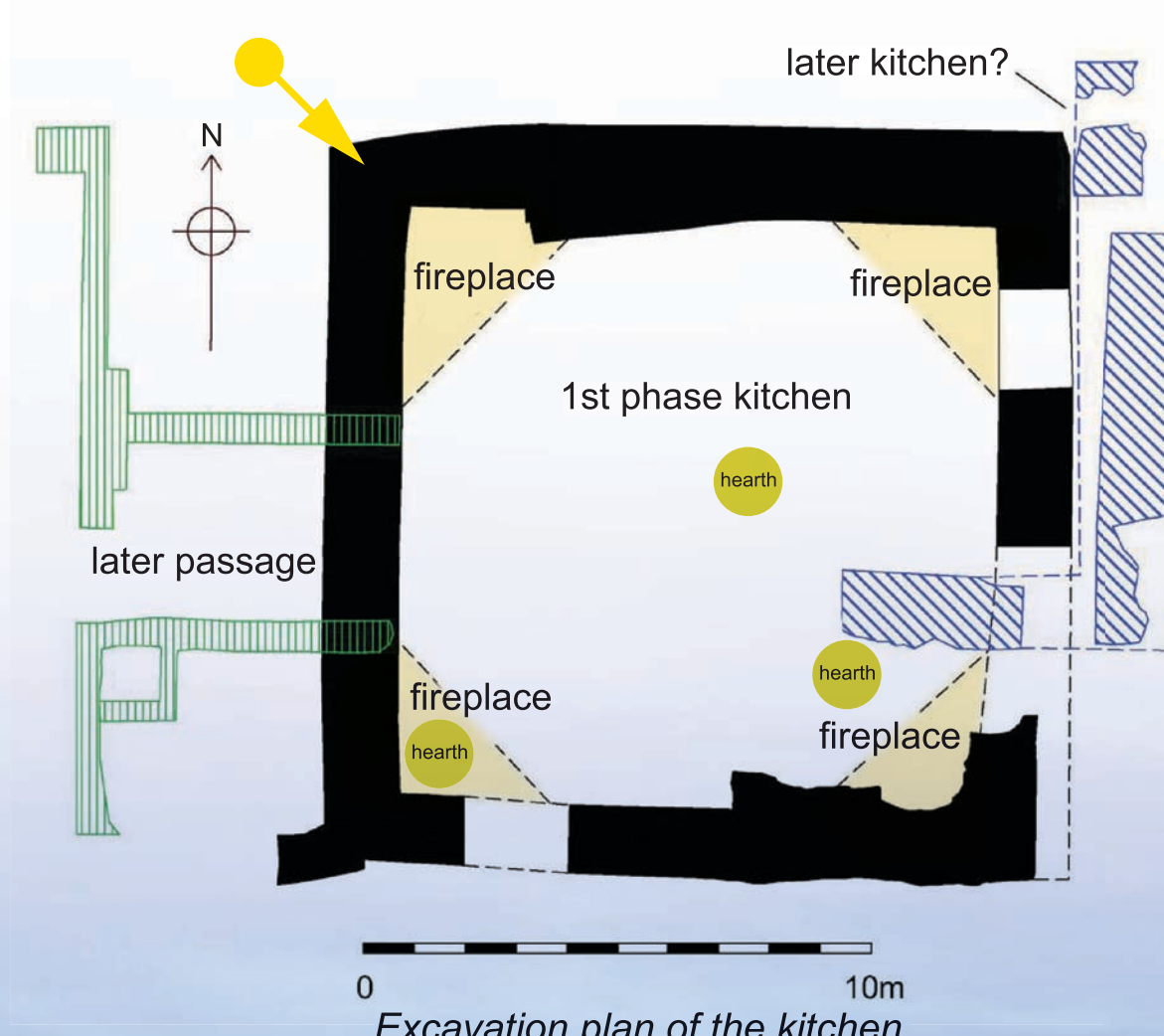
The high risk of fire meant that the earliest medieval kitchens were usually built as separate structures. The Leicester Abbey kitchen seems to have been square externally but octagonal internally, with a large fireplace across each corner. It would have been a very hot place to work, and no doubt, as at Glastonbury Abbey where the medieval Abbot's Kitchen still survives, the building would have had high walls and a pitched roof, with air spaces at the top to help with the ventilation.



A reconstruction drawing of this part of the abbey (John Finnie). The yellow arrow shows the direction of view from this board.



The kitchen at Glastonbury Abbey which is similar in size and shape to the first kitchen at built at Leicester Abbey.



Excavation plan of the kitchen. The yellow arrow shows the direction of view from this board.

Medieval pottery jugs found in Leicester.



A picture of cooks at work, on the 14th century Luttrell Psalter. By permission of the British Library.

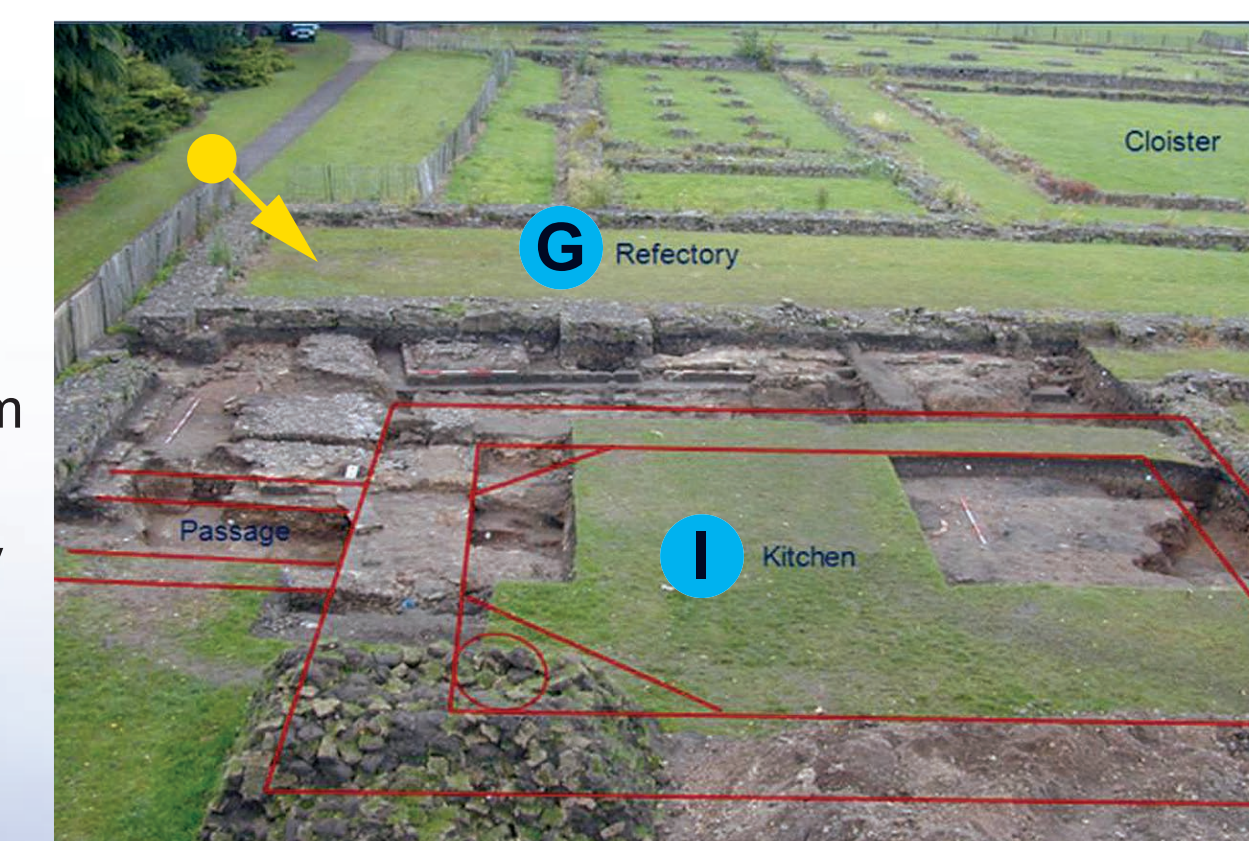


Rainwater drains ran through the kitchen, providing a ready source of water for cleaning fish and other foodstuffs. There was also a piped fresh water supply.

Archaeological remains from the drains and kitchen show that cattle, sheep, goose and fish, together with cereals, peas and beans were key features of the medieval diet.

The kitchen almost certainly served several other buildings, such as the guest hall, via a series of covered walkways or passages. The infirmary may have had its own kitchen.

The square detached kitchen could date from as early as the 12th century, but towards the end of the medieval period it was completely demolished and replaced by a new kitchen attached to the south wall of the refectory. This in turn was knocked-down after the Dissolution in 1538.

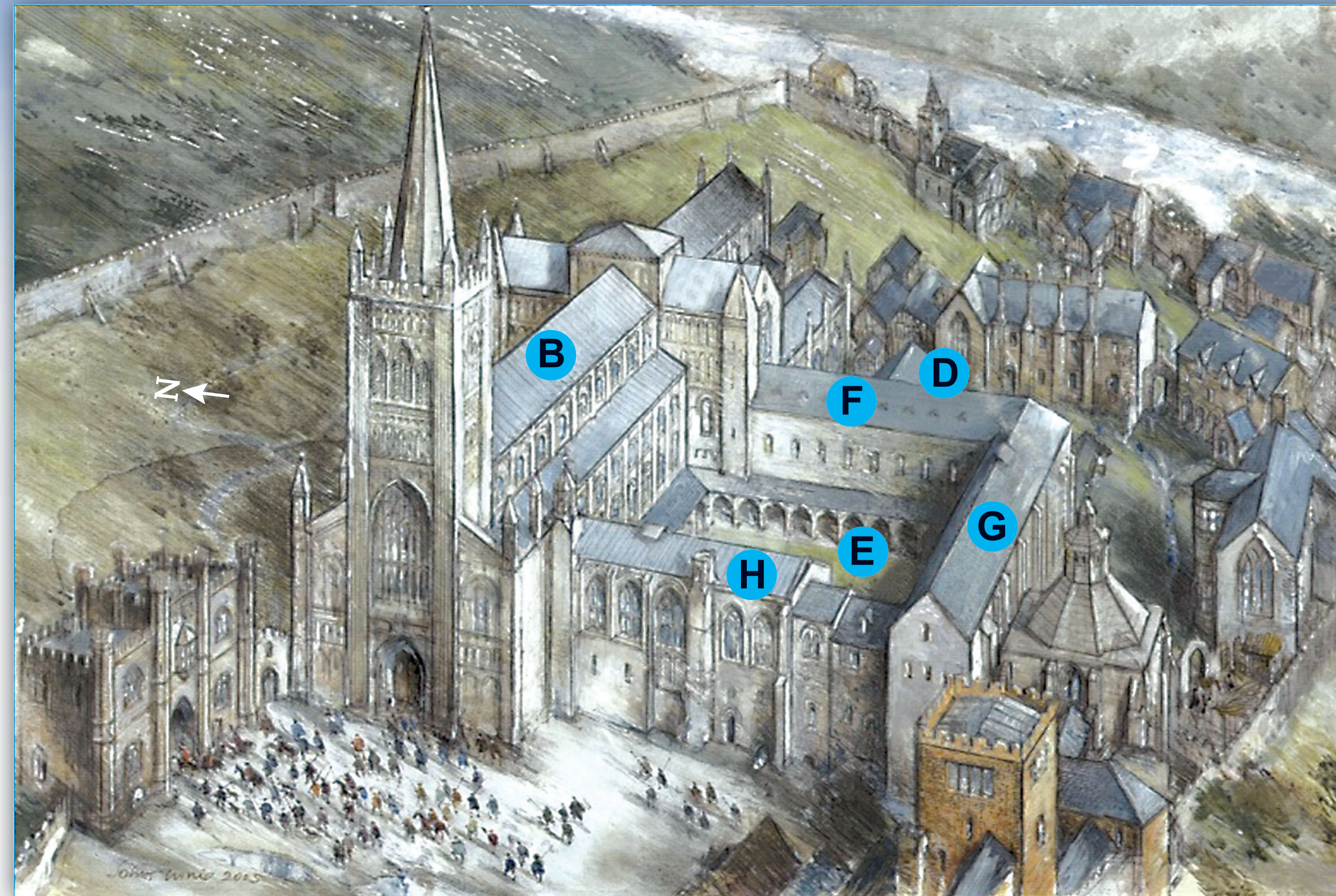


View north of the kitchen under excavation in 2004. The yellow arrow shows the direction of your view from this board.

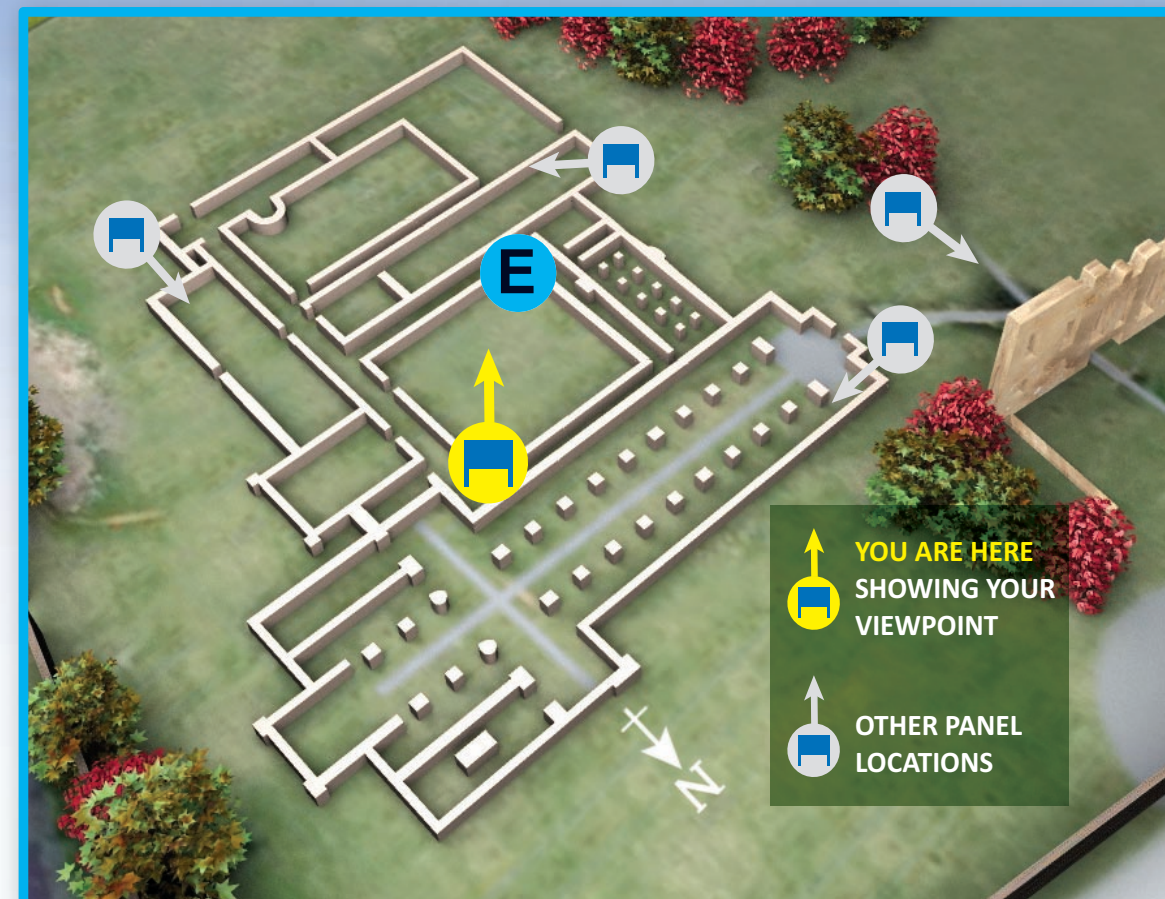


# THE CLOISTERS

Reconstruction of the abbey in the later medieval period (John Finnie).



Tiled floor of the cloister walk beneath the turf.



Excavations in 1929-32 revealed the remains of the church and the other main building ranges of Leicester Abbey. These were then marked out on the ground in 1934 with the low walls that you see today.

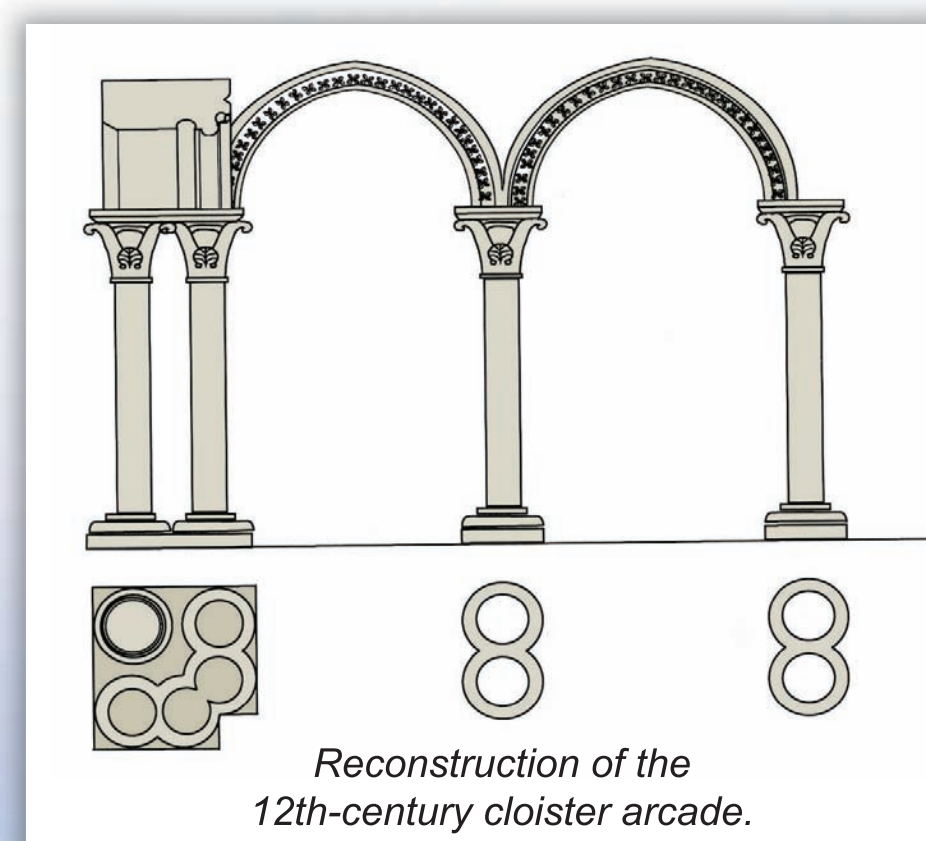


fragment of window tracery.



A carved capital from the cloister arcade.

When these walls were rebuilt between 2005 and 2007, many stone fragments were recovered which have helped us to build up a picture of the architecture of this important group of buildings.



Reconstruction of the 12th-century cloister arcade.

Next to the abbey church (**B**) were the cloisters (**E**) – covered walkways with arcades (a series of arches) facing into an open space or ‘garth’ sometimes used as a garden, to grow herbs and medicinal plants. The discovery of fragments of carved capitals and column bases from the arcades has indicated that that the cloisters date from about 1180-1220, but were completely rebuilt in a different style in the 14th century. Archaeological excavation has shown that the floor was made of square green-glazed and inlaid tiles laid in a diagonal pattern.

To the south of the cloister was the refectory (**G**) where meals were eaten and, at its east end, the ‘warming room’ which was one of the few places in the abbey where a fire was lit. On the west side of the cloister was a range of buildings (**H**) with cellars, perhaps used for the storage of food, such as flour, beans, wine and ale. The upper floors may have contained offices and, for some of the abbey’s history, the abbot’s lodgings. In the western cloister walk was the ‘laver’, a stone basin fed by a piped water supply, where the canons could wash.



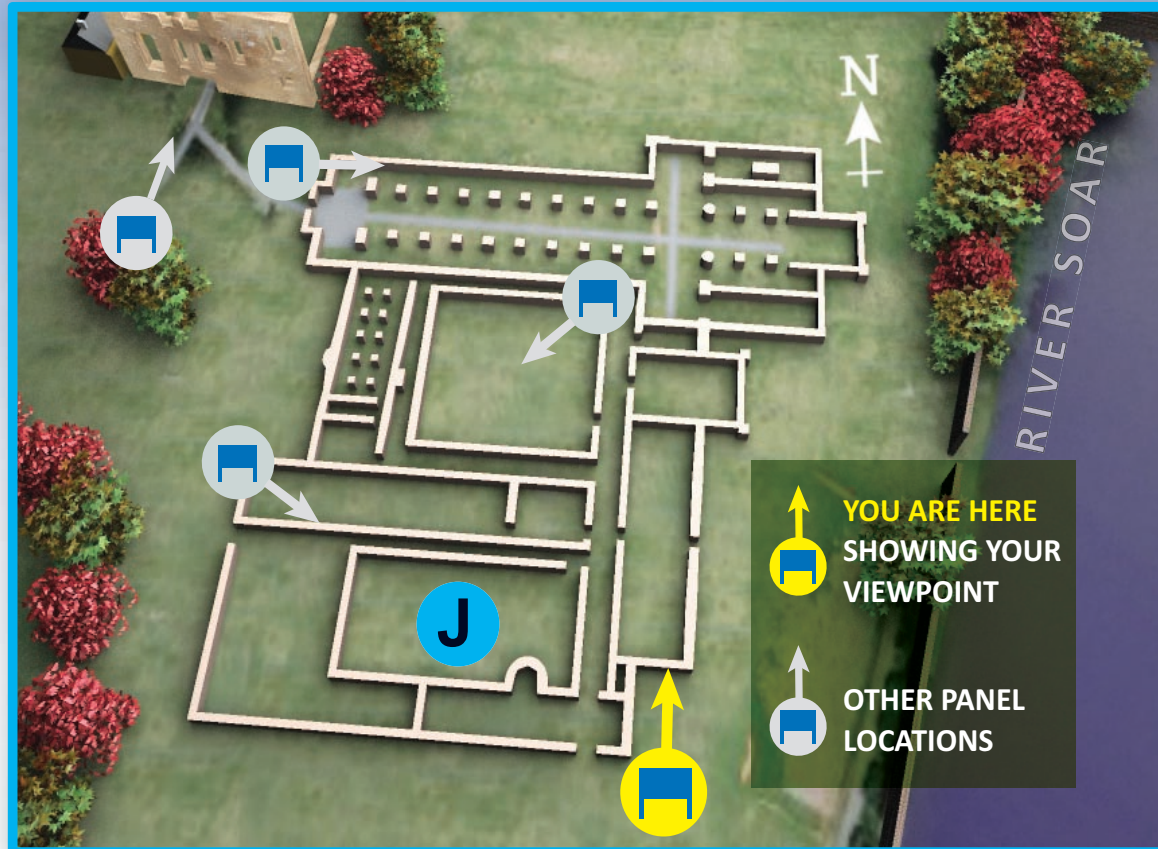
Illuminated letter from one of the surviving Leicester Abbey books.

Opening off the eastern cloister walk was the chapter house (**D**), used for daily meetings of the abbot and canons (priests) to discuss matters affecting the community and to hear confession. A staircase probably led from the eastern cloister walk to the dormitory (**F**) the sleeping quarters of the canons, which occupied the whole of the first floor of this range, above the chapter house.

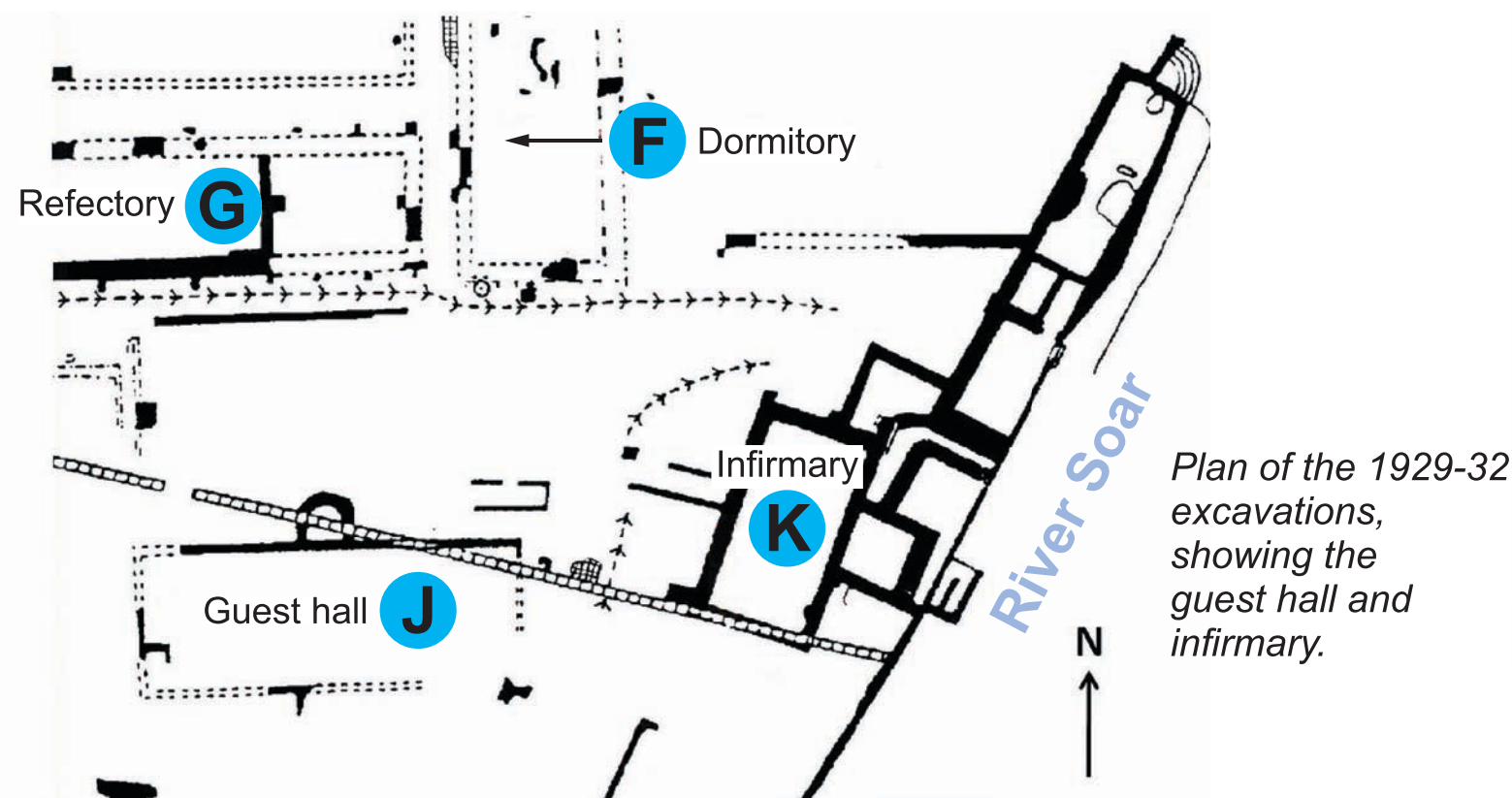


# INFIRMARY AND GUEST HALL

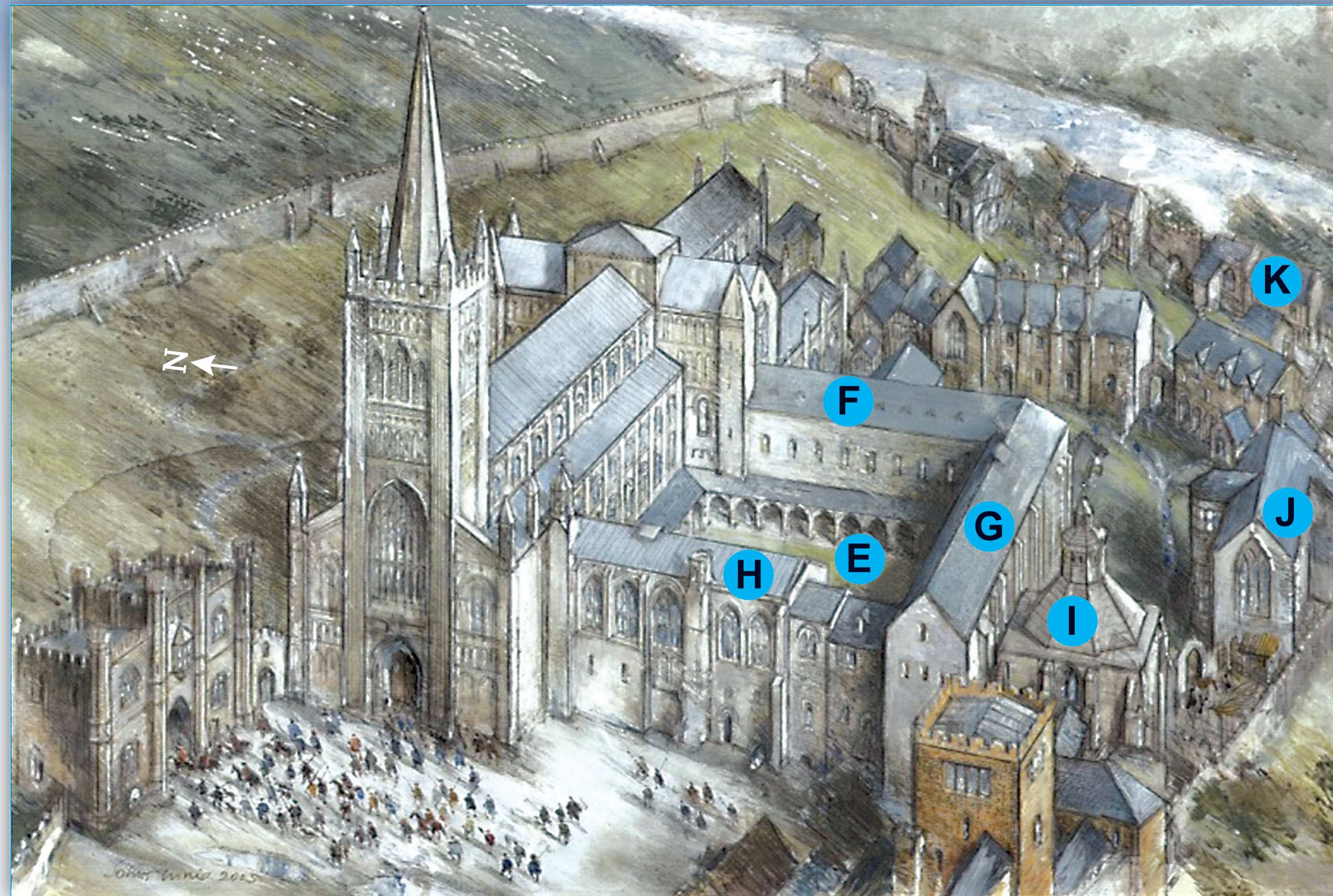
Reconstruction of Leicester Abbey in the later medieval period (by John Finnie).



South of the refectory (G), the 1920s excavations revealed the plan of a rectangular building with what appeared to be a projecting bay window (J). This is thought to be the guest hall where visitors to the abbey would stay.



Excavations in 2008-9 showed that the building plan was in fact more complicated and that the guest hall was probably on the first floor, with garderobes (toilets) at this level, discharging into stone lined pits on the ground floor. These pits had drains leading away from them and would have been flushed clean with water. On the ground floor were further rooms, perhaps for storage, and hall with its own fireplace. Covered walkways connected the guest accommodation with the cloisters and other abbey buildings. Under the walkway floor, the discovery of lead pipes shows that the building had its own fresh water supply.



The archaeological excavations have shown that the abbey buildings continued to the south towards the present cafe. Perhaps future archaeologists will return to carry out more investigations?

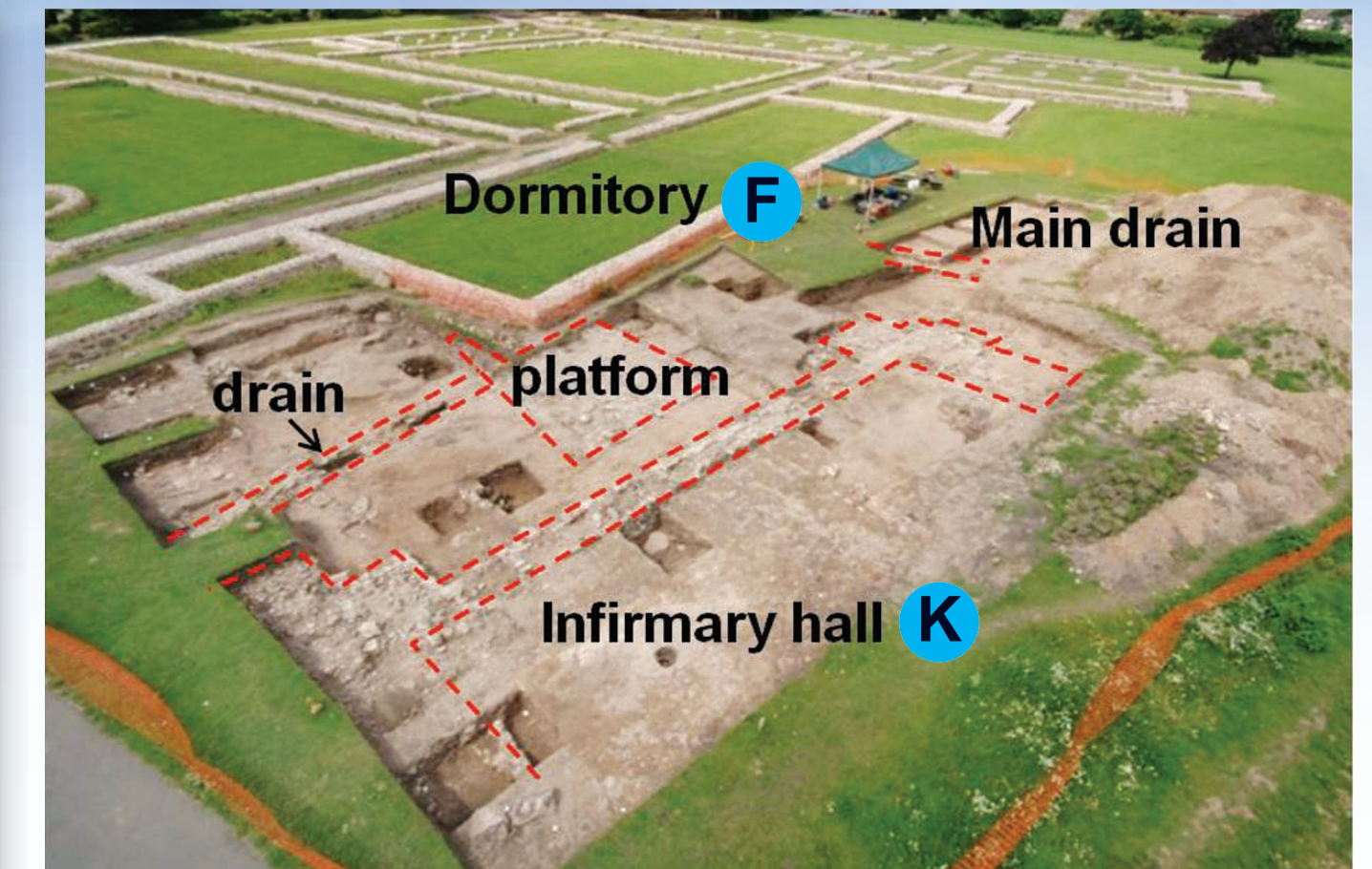
A network of rainwater and foul drains ran from the abbey buildings to the main drain which discharged into the River Soar through a large stone arch in the riverside boundary wall.



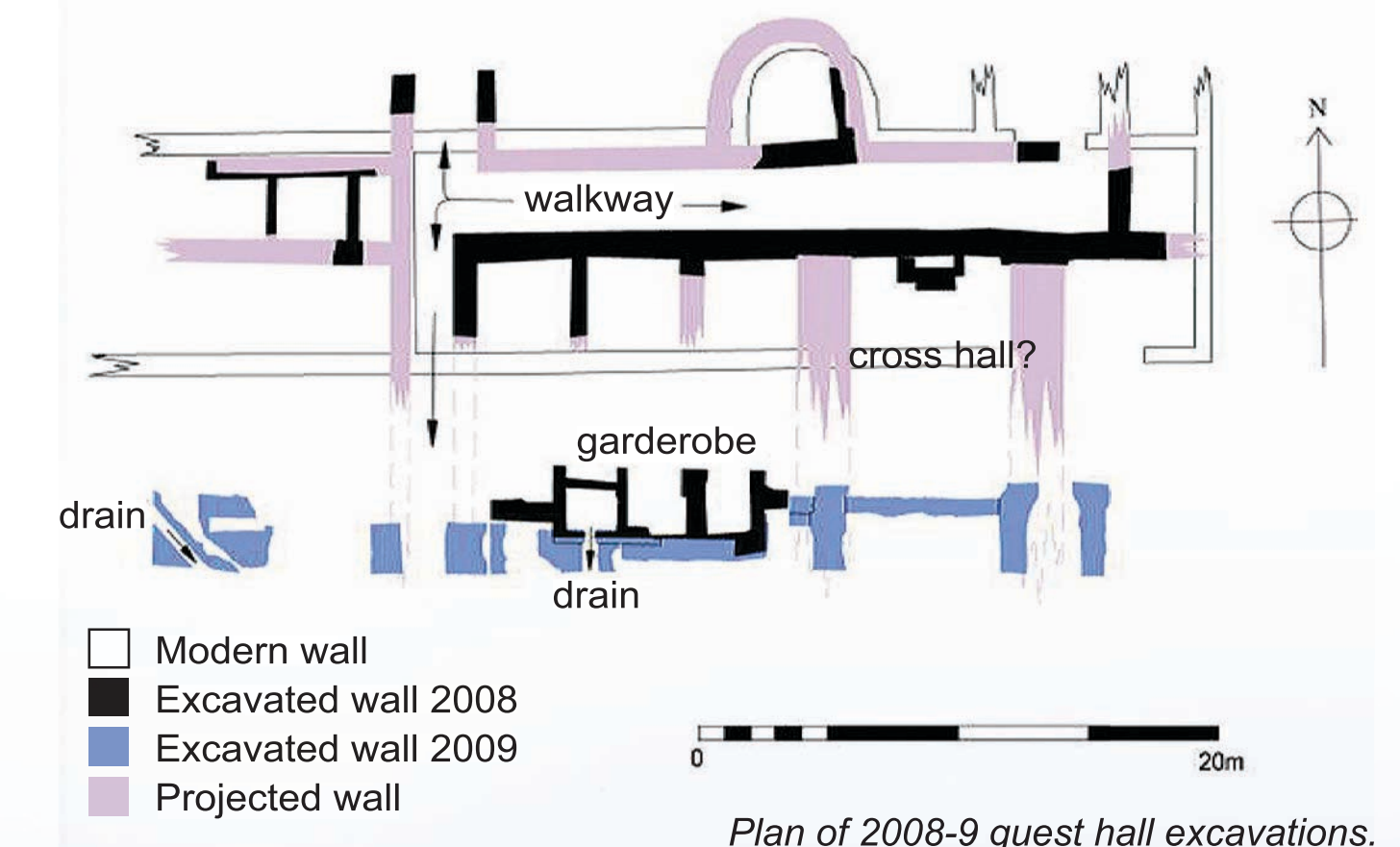
Outlet of the main drain in the riverside wall.



One of the stone-lined garderobe pits.



Attached to the riverside wall, a long range of buildings found in 1930-32 are thought to be the remains of the infirmary (K) where old or infirm canons (priests) would be looked after. The buildings probably included a chapel, a hall and latrines. The hall measured about 15m long and 8m wide and would have had beds arranged along each side so that the sick could still take part in services during the day. A 5m-square stone platform to the west of the infirmary may have supported a large water tank or could be the foundation for a tower.

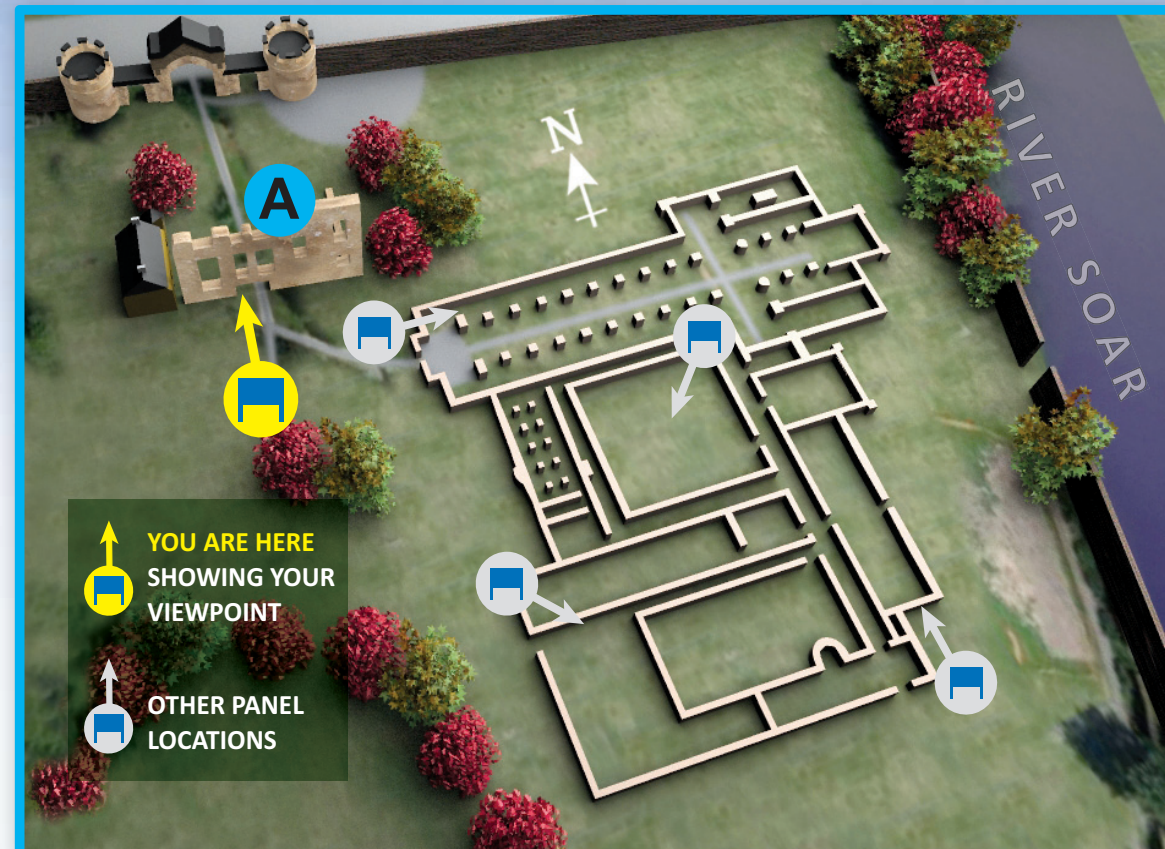


Plan of 2008-9 guest hall excavations.

The infirmary would have worked as a smaller self-contained community within the larger abbey. At the end of their lives members of the community would be buried to the east of the abbey church, or within the church building itself if they were very important.



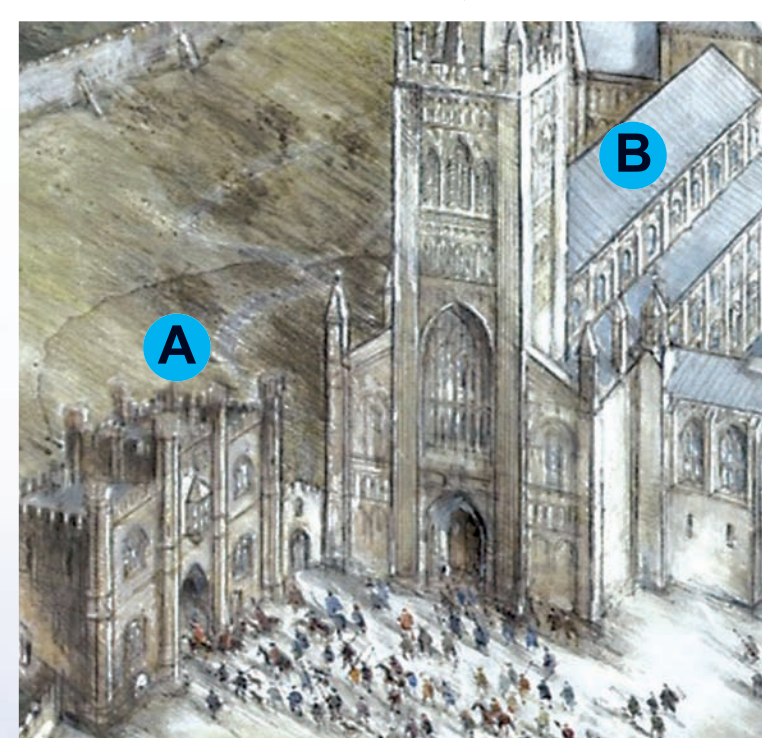
# THE ABBEY GATEHOUSE AND CAVENDISH HOUSE



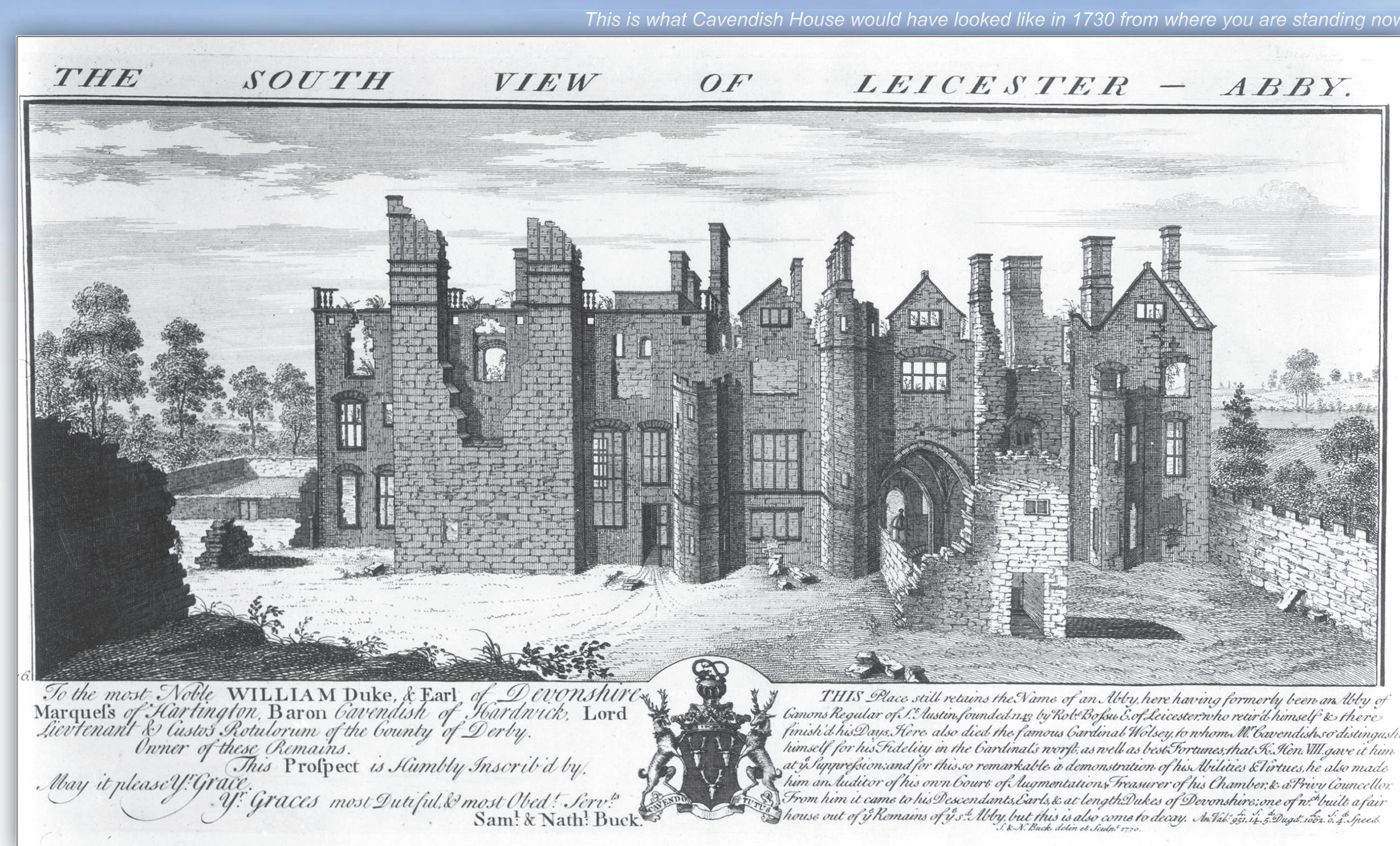
Leicester Abbey was one of the wealthiest Augustinian houses in the country and prospered for nearly 400 years until it was closed in 1538 by Henry VIII during the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Abbey Park was originally laid out in the 1880s and between 1929 and 1932, it was enlarged to include an area of land known as Abbey Grounds on the other side of the River Soar. This contained the ruins of a mansion known as Cavendish House and the buried remains of the Abbey.

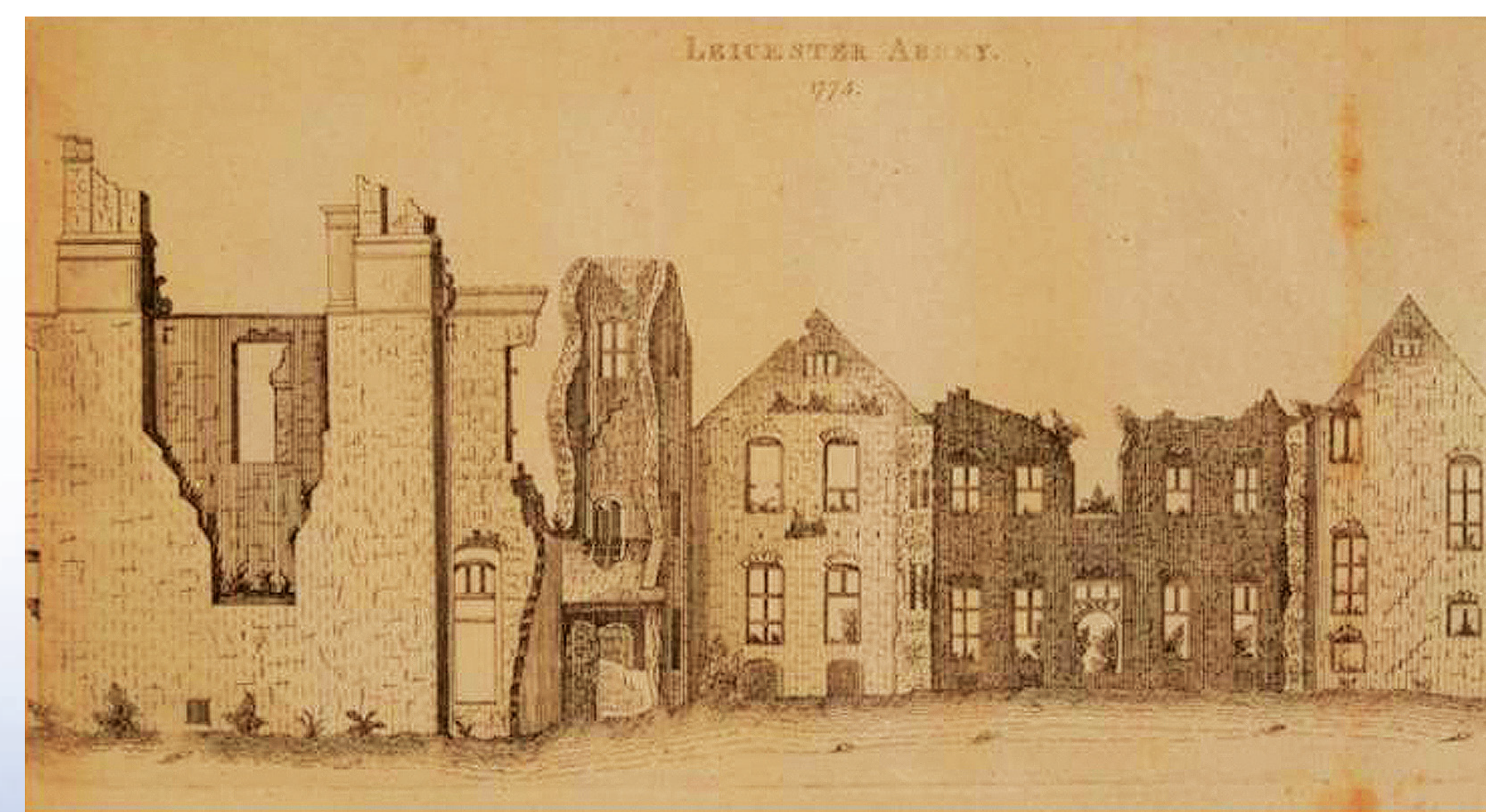
The stone building in front of you is what is left of Cavendish House, which dates to the late 16th or early 17th century. Excavations have shown that this is the site of the medieval gatehouse (A), the main entrance to the abbey. The importance and wealth of the abbey suggests that this would have been an impressive building.



Artist's impression of the abbey gatehouse (A) and church (B) (John Finnie).

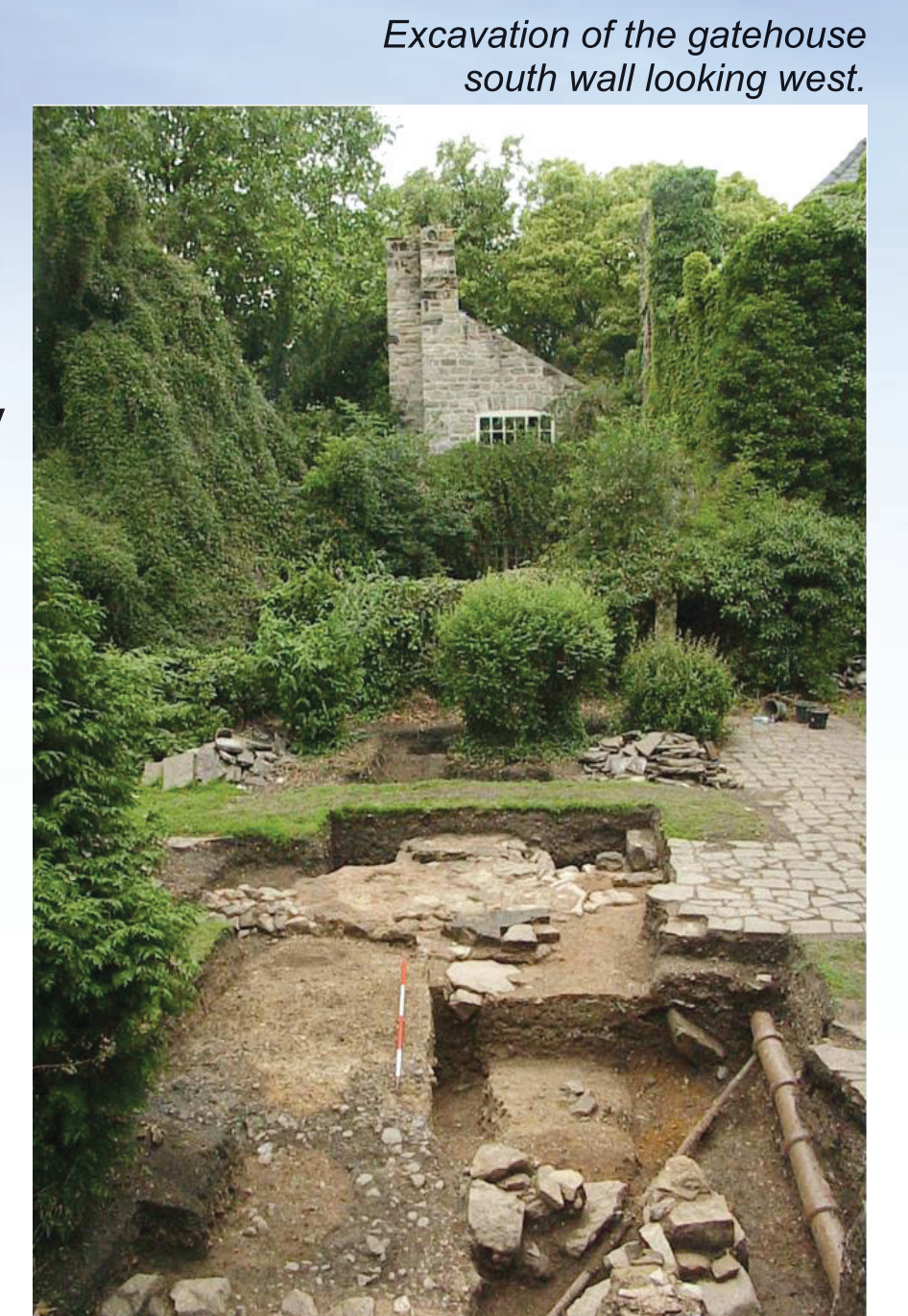


This is what Cavendish House would have looked like in 1730 from where you are standing now.



By 1774, most of this side of the building had collapsed, leaving the ruins much as they appear today, as shown in the picture from 1776.

It was perhaps because the late medieval gatehouse was such a fine building compared with the rest of the abbey that it was enlarged to create a mansion for the Hastings family in the mid 16th century. The house was later sold to the Cavendish family who extended it further in the early 17th century. The house was destroyed by fire during the Civil War in 1645 and some of the smoke-blackened stonework around the windows can still be seen today. The present Abbey House, to the west of the ruins, was built in the early 1800s, re-using the surviving walls of the west wing of the house.



Excavation of the gatehouse south wall looking west.

