

## A POSTSCRIPT TO ST. JOHN'S ABBEY, COLCHESTER

The final CAG Bulletin, number 56, dated 2016, was devoted exclusively to the subject of St. John's Abbey, Colchester. The major part of the contents was a visual history of the Abbey and its precinct, and this article details some further research into this history, which, unsurprisingly, raises more questions than answers.

### The Abbey Church

To recap: In the visual history, two of the iconic images which lay claim to be the Abbey church are shown below in Figs. 1 & 2. They depict an unusual building, with a crenellated tower at the west end, probably one of a pair, and a central tower surmounted by a lantern with a short steeple.



Fig. 1 Etching by Wenceslas Hollar  
*'Monasticum Anglicanum'* Sir William Dugdale, 1661



Fig. 2 Artist James Deane, engraver George Vertue  
*'The History and Antiquities of Colchester'* Philip Morant, 1748

A number of other artists have also reproduced this image, including Edward Rooker in 1767 and Thomas Barber in 1820. It has been used to depict the Abbey church by historians from the seventeenth century to the present day.

For want of any further information, that could have been the end of the story, but surprisingly it transpires that the same image has been used to illustrate a completely different church.

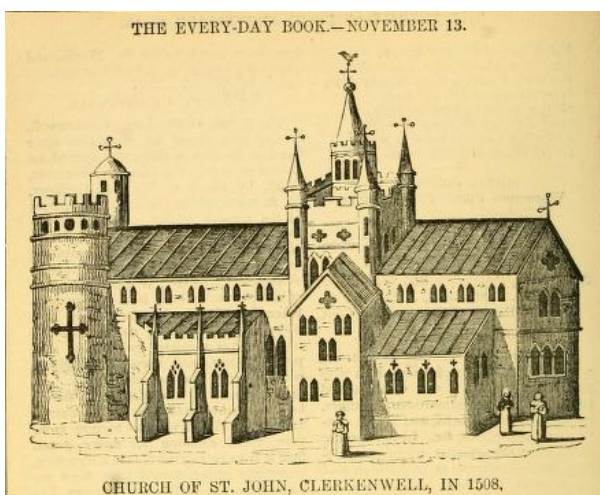


Fig. 3 ?Etching by an unknown artist  
*'The every day book'* W. Hone and G. Cruikshank, 1826

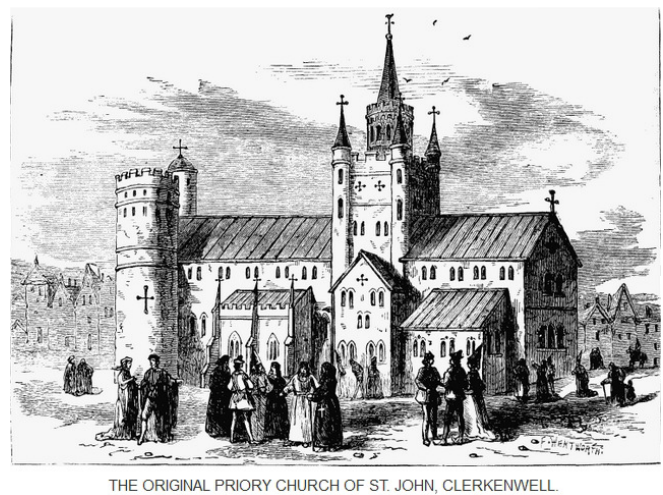


Fig. 4 Engraving by F. Wentworth, 1870s,  
*'Old and New London: Volume 2'* W. Thornbury, 1878

Although there are minor differences in the four images above, they are all clearly based on the image shown in Fig. 5, which is a freehand drawing in pen and ink, with colour-wash, of the south side of a church. This drawing, by an unknown hand, appears at the start of a C17th manuscript in Latin held by the British Library, which details the history St. John's Abbey, Colchester. The text is copied from an earlier, as yet unidentified, manuscript.



Fig. 5 'Marianus Libro Tertio de Monasterio Colecestrensi et eius Fundatore' Cotton Nero D VIII, C17th, © British Library

The unknown artist who made the drawing shown in Fig. 5 never saw Colchester Abbey church. It was created between 50 and 150 years after the demolition of the church, which commenced around 1547. The manuscript containing the drawing has been positively dated as C17th, (Professor Julia Crick, Professor of Paleography, Kings College London, in *'The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth III: A summary catalogue of the manuscripts'* 1989). The drawing, therefore, is either a copy of an earlier image, now lost, (which may or may not have been of Colchester ... or Clerkenwell ... or somewhere else!) or possibly an 'imagined' image.

Apart from this drawing, other details of Colchester Abbey church are scanty. It is recorded that it was re-built on a cruciform plan following a disastrous fire in 1133, and it may have been remodelled in 1235, when it is said that Henry III gave the Abbey '15 oak timbers'.

Clerkenwell Priory church was built in the C12th, burnt down in 1381 'by the Essex Rebels' and was subsequently re-built, with final renovations being completed in 1504 (as purportedly shown in Fig. 3). More interestingly, there are accounts of the church by C16th and C17th historians:

William Camden (1551-1623), *Brittania Volume 2 p85 1586*, on the reconstruction of the Priory:

*"This house increased to the size of a palace, and had a beautiful church, with a tower carried up to such a height as to be, while it stood, a singular ornament to the city."*

John Stow (1525-1605) *Survey of London 1598*:

*"The priory church and house of St. John was preserved from spoil or down pulling so long as King Henry VIII reigned ..... but in the 3rd of King Edward VI (1549) the church, for the most part, to wit, the body and the side aisles, with the great bell tower (a most curious piece of workmanship ..... passing all other I have scene) ..... was undermined and blown up with gunpowder"*

Whilst Camden was writing after the event, Stow could very well have seen the church for himself prior to 1549.

For want of any other image, Figs. 1,2 & 5 have been repeatedly used to illustrate St. John's, Colchester, virtually always without qualification. I suspect that we will never know definitively if it is really so, especially as there is now a realistic alternative in St. John's, Clerkenwell. There must, however, be a greater element of doubt than has been shown by historians to date.

I would, of course, welcome any further contributions on this subject – email John Moore at [cagtrips@btinternet.com](mailto:cagtrips@btinternet.com).