

The Biggin



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NHDC Archaeology Officer

The Biggin: a brief history

- The Biggin was founded as a Gilbertine Priory in 1361
 - Sir Edward de Kendale
 - Whose tomb is in the church
 - In 1402, an indulgence was granted to those giving alms for its upkeep on the Feast of the Annunciation
 - Sold in 1544 after its Dissolution in 1538
- In the mid seventeenth century, run by John Kempe as a school
 - He bequeathed it to his sister on condition it became almshouses after her death
 - She died in 1723
 - It became the parish workhouse as well as housing “Kempe’s Old Ladies”
 - The poorhouse moved to Bancroft in 1812
 - The Biggin converted to provide a home for 18 elderly women





The Listing record

- According to the List, the building is seventeenth-century in date
 - Seventeenth-century brickwork in chimneys
 - Later brickwork repairs
- This was the opinion of the inspector in 1951
 - But resurveyed in 1954 and June 1968
 - It was concluded that it was fourteenth-century in origin
 - But it was not big enough to incorporate a church, a chapter house, refectory, canons' dorter and lay brethrens' dorter
- How could this be tested?
 - A search could be made for the additional buildings
 - Excavation was the only option in the 1960s
 - So one took place in 1968-9



The excavation

- Directed by Christopher Beresford-Webb
 - As a project while studying at Putteridgebury College
- Never actually published
 - The location of the records and finds is currently unknown
 - Dr Beresford-Webb retired to Gozo
 - And died in January 2009
 - There is a typescript copy of his project in Hitchin Museum
 - This seems to be the only available account of the work
- There was a problem in relations with Hitchin Museum
 - Dr Beresford-Webb fell out with the curator
 - Although the Assistant Curator, Mary Gadd, took part in the excavation
 - He fell out with John Moss-Eccardt at Letchworth Museum and the North Herts Archaeological Society
 - A Hitchin councillor, Bob Price, jumped into the trench during an official visit on 29 May 1969
 - He declared that the site was needed immediately for a car park
 - A two week stay of execution was granted





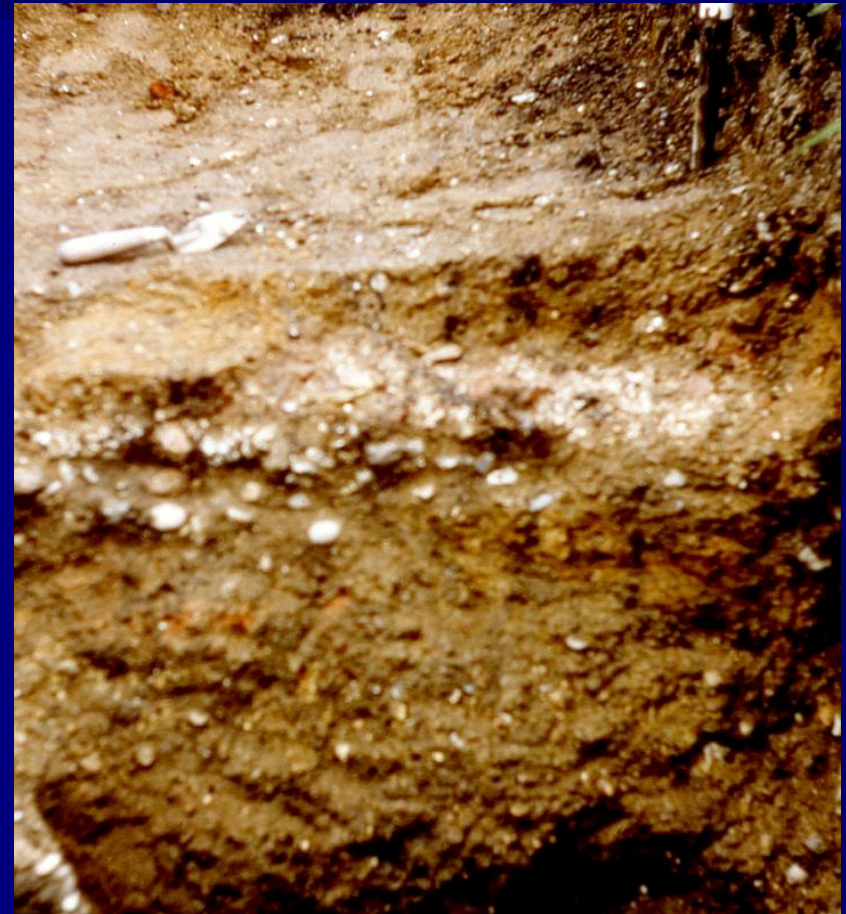
Where to dig?

- On the south side, an eighteenth-century building was demolished in 1958
 - No traces of earlier foundations were seen
- Hitchin UDC laid a drain in Biggin Lane to the north early in 1968
 - No traces of foundations were seen here either
- The River Hiz lies only a few metres to the west
 - So there is no room for conventual buildings there
- The Priory buildings must have lain to the east
 - And the building survey showed that the north and south ranges were truncated on this side

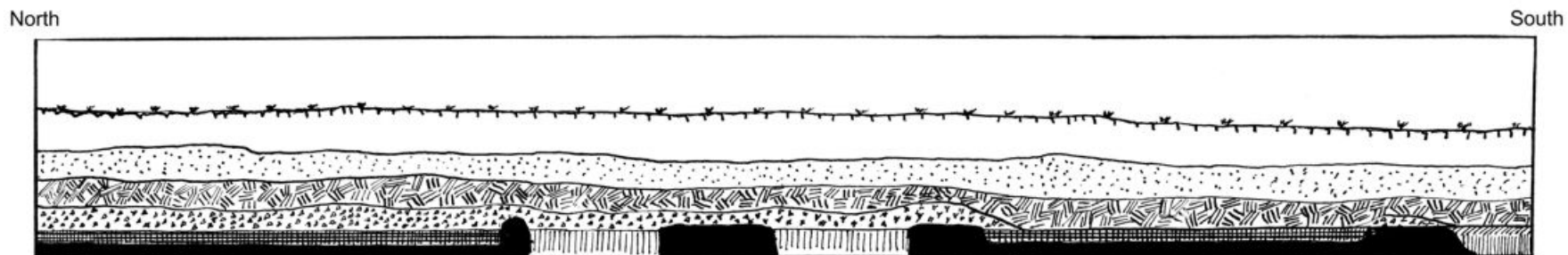


The stratigraphy

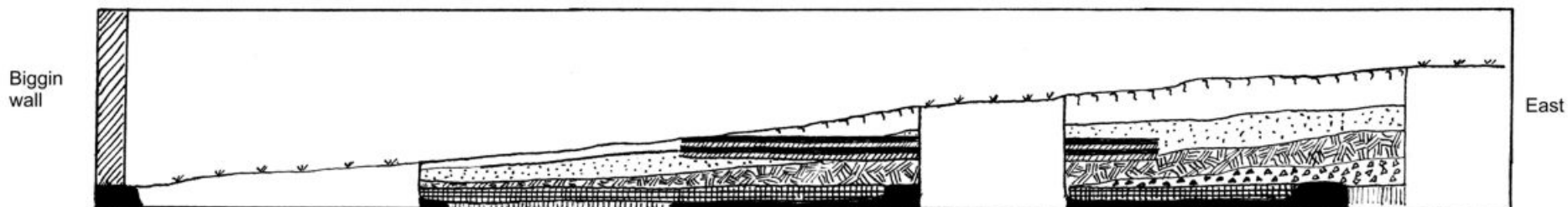
- The topsoil varied in depth
 - A minimum of 5 cm by the east wall of the building
 - A maximum of 50 cm at the Queen Street end
- This sealed a sandy soil containing mortar and rubble
 - Generally around 18 cm thick
- Beneath this was a very rubbly layer
 - Between 5 and 18 cm thick
- This sealed the foundations of the Priory building and a humic layer
 - The organic soil was around 30 cm thick
 - There was also a chalk floor 18 cm thick to the east of The Biggin
 - Which overlay the foundations
 - But its date is unclear



Eastern trench wall strata










Northern trench wall strata



SCALE



-  = Modern surface
-  = Sandy subsoil
-  = Mortar, rubble and soil
-  = Building rubble
-  = Packed earth floor
-  = Packed chalk floor
-  = Building foundations

The foundations

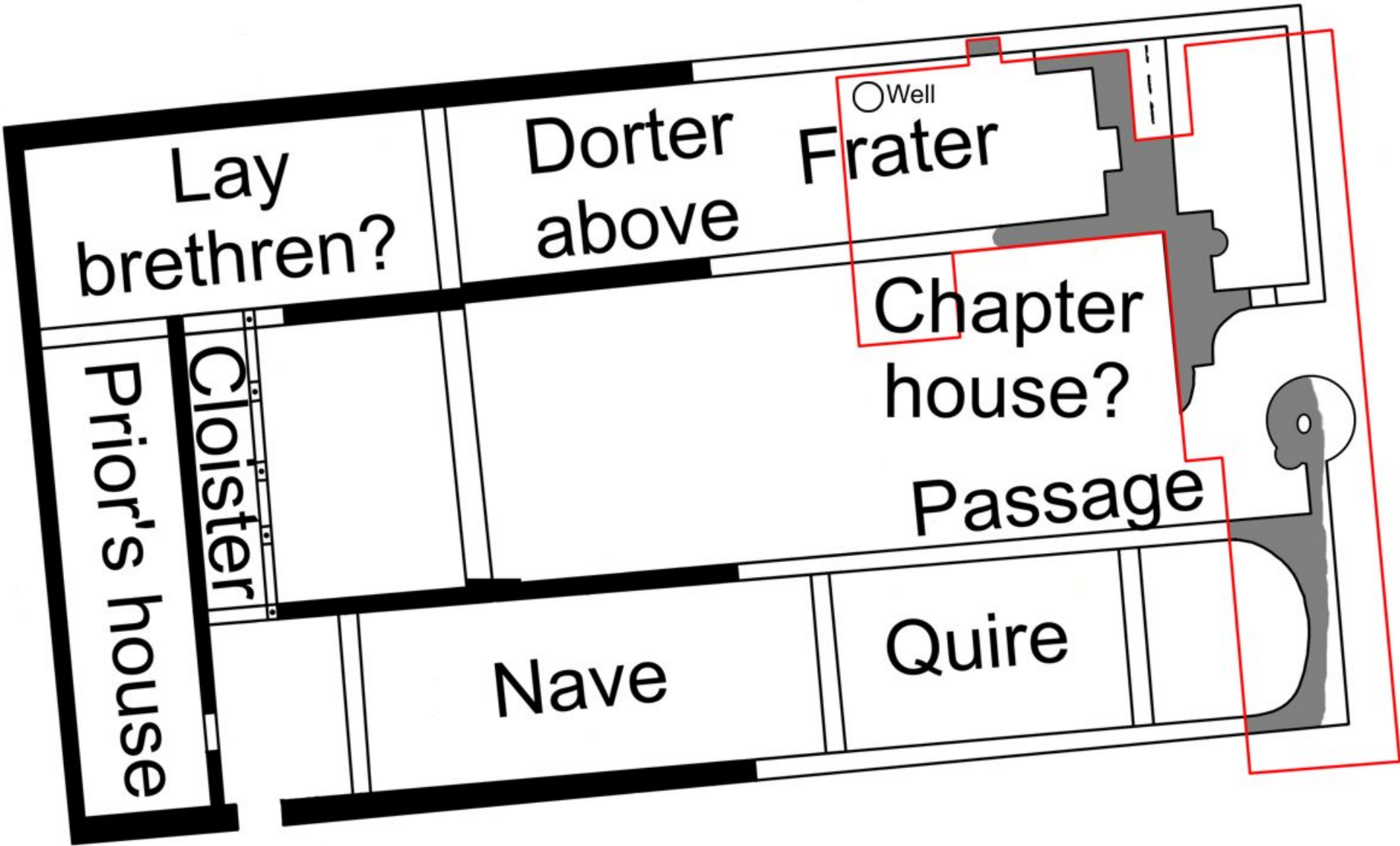
- The building had dwarf walls
 - The timber framing rested on top of them
 - They consisted of mortared stone about 20 cm high
 - And projected 13.7 m east from the existing building
 - They were at the same level as in the existing building
- The walls rested on rubble and hardcore foundations
 - These were 23 cm deep



Floors

- A layer of packed chalk on the south side
 - Overlain by red floor tiles 5 cm thick
 - Undecorated
 - The Gilbertines insisted on plain church interiors
 - A step up of 30 cm just east of the present building marks the transition from nave to quire
- Similar flooring on the northern side
 - Evidence for a fireplace in one area
- Between the two and marked by flimsy walls was an earthen floor
 - And a circular staircase with a central wooden post
- Floors had sixteenth-century pottery on them
 - And fourteenth-century pottery under the floor to the north-east





Lay brethren?

Prior's house

Cloister

Dorter above

Frater

Well

Chapter house?

Passage

Nave

Quire

The plan

- The church is on the south side
 - The southern wing includes most of the nave
 - This is a typical Gilbertine arrangement
 - The quire and presbytery have an apsidal east end
 - This is unusual for the fourteenth century
 - It may be an adaptation to local conditions
- There may have been a gallery at the western end of the nave
 - This would lead to the Prior's house in the south-western corner
 - The remainder of the western wing would have been the lay brethrens' dorter and kitchen
- The canons' dorter lay to the north-east
 - Approached by the spiral staircase
 - The warming room lay beneath it
- The canons' frater (refectory) lay on the north side
 - A well was found just east of the present building
- The chapter house was not located
 - It may have lain between the frater and the passage leading from the dorter into the quire









“Charlie the monk”

- In early June 1969, a skeleton was discovered
 - Its precise location is unclear
 - It seems to straddle the boundary between The Biggin and the Seebohm Garden
 - It had important legal implications
 - Human remains have to be treated carefully
- Assumed to be the burial of one of the canons
 - Not necessarily the case
 - Lay patrons could be buried in the church
 - But the burial seems to have been in the Chapter House
 - In which case it is possibly one of the priors
- Caused local controversy
 - One of the reasons the excavation was never finished





Charlie's got a bone to pick

By
BILL WIGMORE

THE GHOST of a Gilbertine monk has stepped into the row between Hitchin urban council and a local archaeologist.

And "stepped in" is the operative phrase. Last week the council told Mr Chris Beresford-Webb to fill in his dig on the site of the old Gilbertine monastery, just off Queen Street. Half the ground belongs to Hitchin United Charities — who are quite prepared to let the dig go on — and half to the council.

Now Mr Beresford-Webb has found a skeleton — with its big toe on the council side of the ground.

"I'm not quite sure if it's a Gilbertine, or a victim of the plague," he said, surveying the exposed leg and what remains of the foot. "Anyhow, we've christened him Charlie for the time-being, and we should be able to find out the truth about him when I've finished digging him up."

Mixed blessing

If Charlie is a Gilbertine, he's running true to form. By all accounts, they were a bloody-minded lot, who deliberately chose the most unhealthy surroundings to live in, disapproved anything that made life bearable, and generally made themselves unpleasant.

In which case, Charlie must be laughing in his chesty beard. For the dig cannot be filled in until the coroner has examined the complete body, and given his permission for a re-burial.

The history of the Gilbertine dig is complicated enough without Charlie's interference. Mr Beresford-Webb got written permission from the council to start his excavations, and was later told to fill it in again so that the ground could be used as a car park.

"Why they couldn't wait just two more months until work was complete, I don't know," he said.

"We've added about 1,000 years of history to Hitchin already. I did get an extension until next Wednesday, so continue digging around the area where we



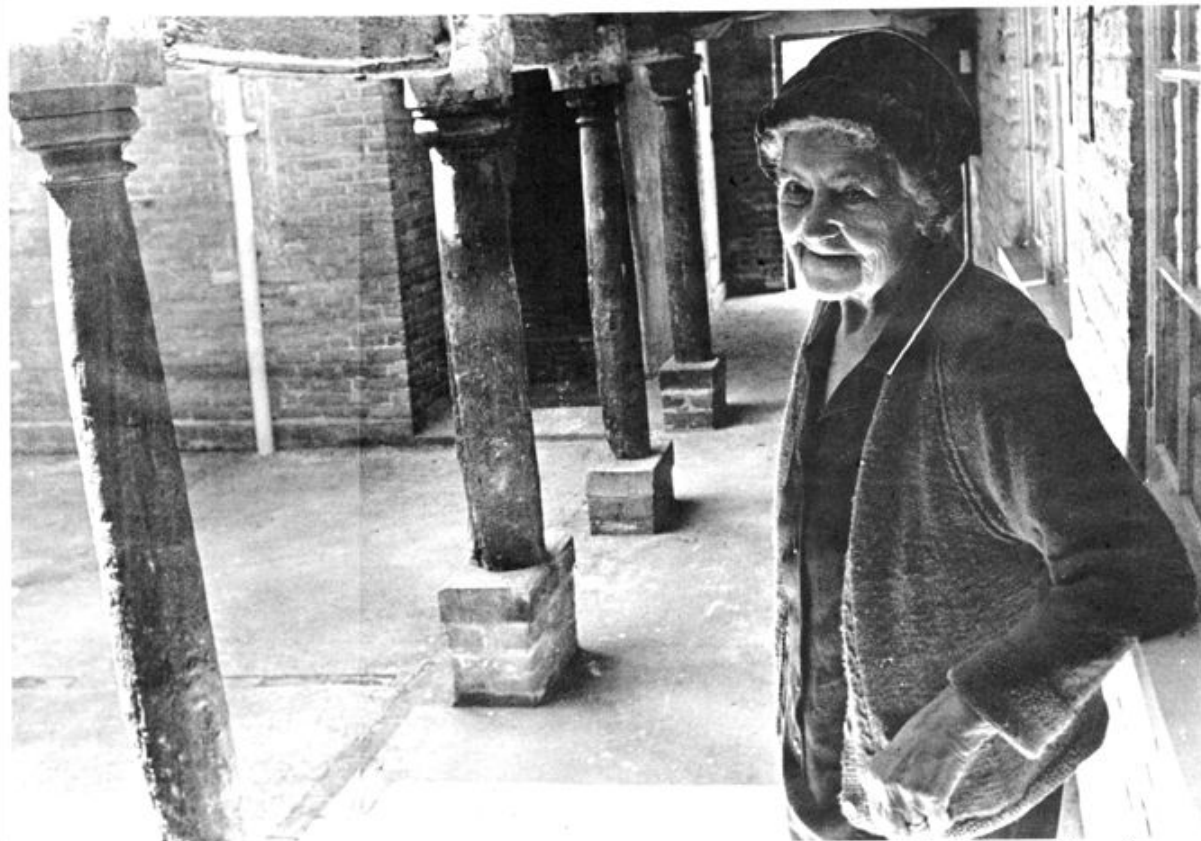
Chris Beresford-Webb carefully removes earth from the bones

found some fragments of skull, but we've found Charlie's foot right where we're supposed to be filling in again."

Mind you, Charlie's appearance is something of a mixed blessing.

"If he wasn't there, I might have been able to have completed my work in that section in time," said Mr Beresford-Webb. "As it is, I just can't continue. I dare not dig around him, because it would spoil the site for any future excavations."

Angry ghosts of the Biggin



Mrs Ethel Townsend — "They don't like it, all these people tampering with the past."

THE SAGA of Old Charlie — the Gilbertine monk whose bones were discovered on Mr Chris Beresford-Webb's "dig" near Queen Street Hitchin — has developed a new twist.

Recently, the Evening Post told how Charlie had successfully confounded Mr Beresford-Webb's attempt to dig deeper into the history of the old Gilbertine priory.

Now a resident at the Biggin Old People's Cottages claims that some of Charlie's colleagues have got in on the act as well.

"They don't like it, all these people tampering with the past," said Mrs Ethel Townsend, a former spiritualist. "There's been nothing but bad luck in these cottages ever since the digging began."

Coldness

"One old lady even moved away. She didn't know what prompted her to go, but she knew she had to move. And

we've all been hit by illness — I've been bad myself, it's just not right."

And Mrs Townsend is convinced that the spirits of Charlie's 14th century contemporaries are to blame.

"Even one of the girls working on the site has noticed it," she said. "I stood here and watched her. All of a sudden she started and looked over her shoulder, just as if she felt someone behind her. I've talked to her myself, and she tells me she keeps hearing voices telling her to go and leave them in peace."

"I suppose it might just be my fancy, but you could feel the coldness over there in the corner. You can't disturb the dead without something happening."

So far we have been unable to trace anyone working on the site who believes in ghosts. But Mrs Townsend is quite convinced that the sooner it is filled in, the sooner life will get back to normal in the Biggin Cottages.

Story BILL WIGMORE

Picture DAVID SATCHEL

Post. 6 June 1969

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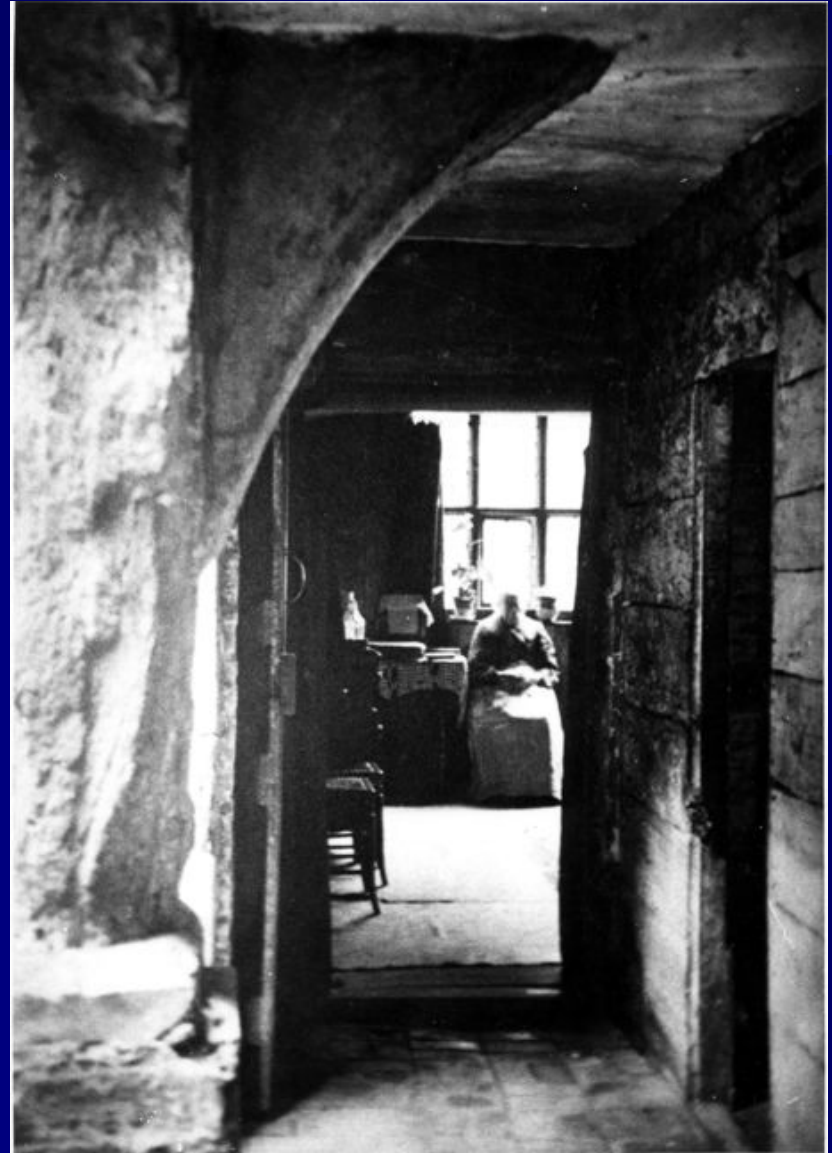
The end of the Priory

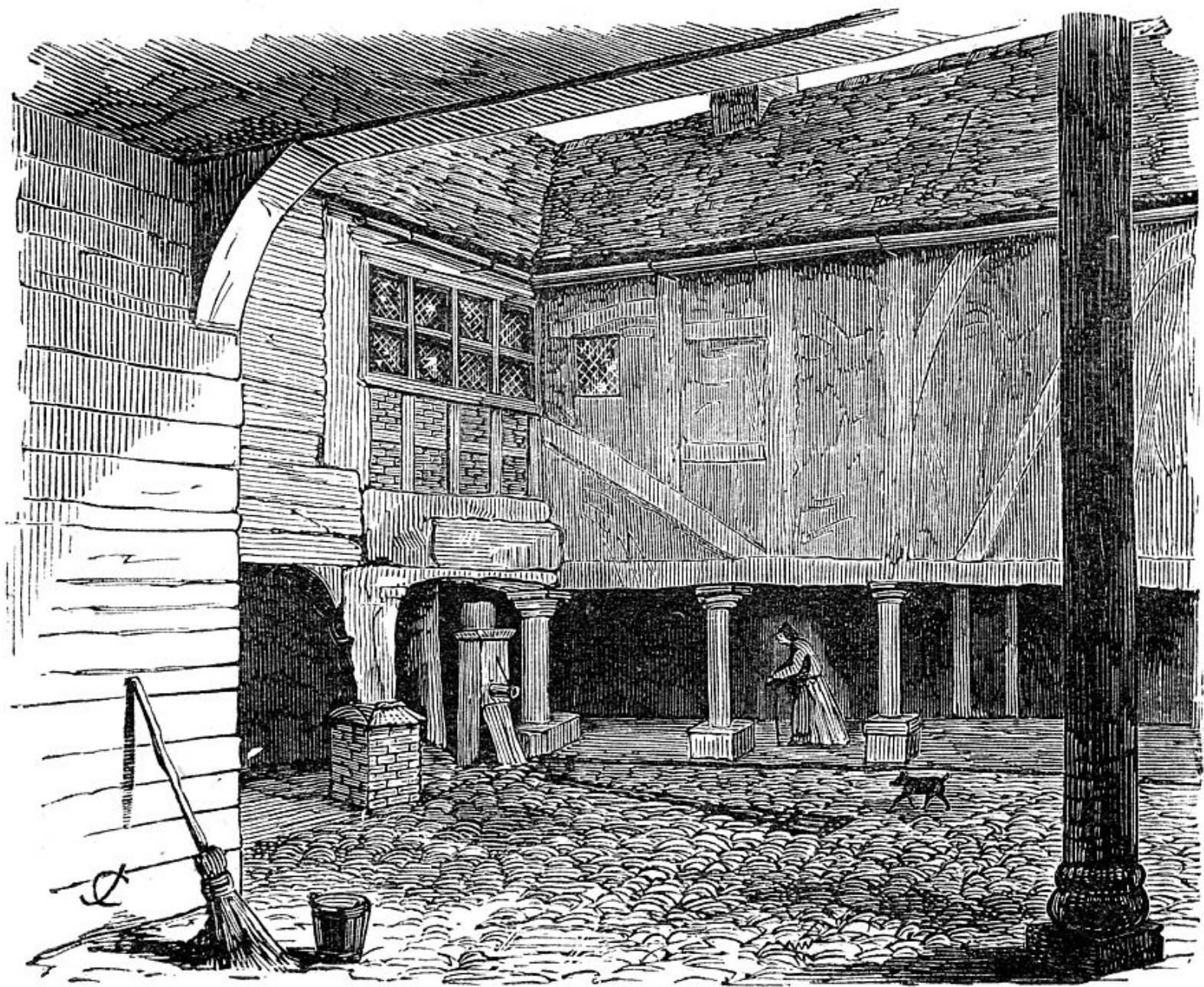
- There seems to have been a fire in the early sixteenth century
 - The east end of the church was destroyed
 - And never rebuilt
 - It probably affected the entire eastern part of the Priory
- When it became a house in 1545, it needed a lot of repairs
 - A first floor was inserted into the nave
 - Supported on brick walls to make a great hall
 - The eastern infill was added
 - Creating a long gallery the full width of the building
 - Chimney stacks were added



Use as a school and almshouses

- Joseph Kempe acquired the building in the 1630s
 - It became a boarding school
 - With accommodation for six servants and two masters as well as the pupils
 - Extensive alterations would have been necessary
 - There is a 1920s report of painted panelling, which must date from this period
- The school closed in 1723
 - Hired out to the Overseers of the Poor
 - In 1730 a building was added to the south-western corner
 - Demolished in 1958
 - A pump was installed in the courtyard
 - The lead was stolen from the roof in 1856





INTERIOR OF THE BIGGIN, HITCHIN.

Overview of the building

- The Biggin is an unusual building
 - It is the second oldest building in the town
 - But not generally recognised as such
 - Its ecclesiastical past is concealed beneath later alterations
 - It is still Listed as a seventeenth-century structure
- But its history is typical of an old building
 - Centuries of alteration and adaptation
 - Some good, some bad
 - It survives because it was not highly valued in the past
 - And was nearly lost in the 1950s
- This raises questions about how useful Listed buildings are
 - Have the better and higher status buildings been lost?





The end