Historic England

Hermitages

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to hermitages (places which housed a religious individual or group seeking solitude and isolation). Six types of medieval hermitage have been identified based on their siting: island and fen; forest and hillside; cave; coast; highway and bridge; and town. Descriptions of solitary; cave; communal; chantry; and lighthouse hermitages; and town hermits and their development are included. Hermitages have a large number of possible associations and were fluid establishments, overlapping with hospices, hospitals, monasteries, nunneries, bridge and chantry chapels and monastic retreats. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

Front cover
The outside of the medieval hermitage at Warkworth, Northumberland. Probably established around 1400, the site includes a chapel cut directly out of the rock

Introduction

A hermitage housed a religious individual or group seeking solitude and isolation. In England they occur from the 7th to 16th centuries AD. The term hermitage comes from the Greek word for desert, and hermit-monks closely resembled the contemplative monastics who sought to emulate the 3rd and 4th century hermits of Egypt and Syria (for example John the Baptist and St Anthony).

Although their ascetic inmates led more isolated and austere lives than the religious within regular monasteries, hermits were not always strictly enclosed within their houses or settlements. Sometimes they were active preachers, mediators in disputes and alms-collectors, or they performed valuable services being responsible for maintaining lighthouses, highways, ferries and bridges.

Initially, at least, hermitages were institutions that followed the life-style of an individual hermit or group of hermits rather than a regular monastic rule. By about the 12th century, the function of a hermitage varied according to whether it was occupied by hermit-monks, canons (priests who lived by a strict rule) or priests.

Other hermitages were retreat houses serving monastic communities, providing a place for contemplation and rest. Hermit-canons were bound to provide hospitality. Their hermitages sometimes served as hospices, or were linked to hospitals or leper houses. Priest-hermits served bridges, lighthouses and chantry chapels (where masses were said for the soul of the patron), which formed part of, or were adjacent to the hermitage.

This diversity in the function of hermitages and, in some cases, their continued use and adaptation over a significant period of time, resulted in considerable variety in their form.

1 Categories

Hermitages can be subdivided firstly into those which provided accommodation for a single hermit, and secondly those which housed a community of hermits (also called eremitic monasteries). They occur all over the British Isles, but the majority of known sites in England are in the north and east.

Further distinctions can be drawn according to a hermit's chosen dwelling place. This would be carefully selected to provide the necessary environment, often for quiet contemplation on the physical and spiritual margins of medieval society. Six types of hermitage have been identified based on their siting: island and fen; forest and hillside; cave; coast; highway and bridge; and town. Some hermitages were components of other structures, for example town walls and gates, lighthouse towers and bridges.

Hermitages are recognised through standing and excavated remains, documents, place-names and antiquarian drawings. Their main components can include an oratory or chapel, cell (or group of cells) or domestic ranges, sometimes arranged around a courtyard. They also required a well, latrine and, in larger examples additional domestic buildings such as kitchens, ovens and dovecotes.

The hermitage was generally enclosed by walls of stone or earth, ditches, or a moat. From the 12th century onwards a more extreme form of ascetic practice could be found in the office of the anchorite who took vows to be permanently enclosed within an anchorhold or cell attached to a parish or monastic church. The anchorite or anchoress was entirely dependent on the support of patrons in their life of contemplation and prayer over many years. This was distinct from the hermit who was self-sufficient either through manual labour or alms collection.

2 Literary Evidence

Descriptions of pre-Conquest hermitages survive in narratives and saints' lives, in particular Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* and Felix's *Life of Guthlac*, all written between about AD 720 and 740. In comparison with regular monasteries, later medieval hermitages have left few contemporary documents as they may have been established with no formal monastic rule.

The foundations and early histories of hermitages are provided as part of chronicles of associated contemporary houses or of the monasteries into which hermitages evolved (for example Fountains Abbey). Later establishments required episcopal licenses. Cartographic sources and place names sometimes suggest the approximate location of hermitages, but little evidence tends to survive on the ground.

3 Description and Development

Solitary Hermitages

The first hermits in Britain (AD 400-700) were Holy Men who established themselves on the boundaries of human occupation. Their hermitages were temporary shelters set up in caves, ruins, coastal promontories, islands and marshes. Then, in 10th – 11th century England, individual hermits established permanent cells. These sites were held in high esteem by pilgrims, and often attracted a continuing tradition of occupation by hermits.

The basic requirements for a hermitage were an oratory or chapel, and one or more cells. Additional components varied according to whether the site was occupied by a solitary hermit or a community of hermits, and what functions the hermitage fulfilled.

Early eremitic communities are associated with northern and Atlantic Britain (Scotland, Wales, Northumberland, Cornwall and Ireland). Hermitages of the 7th century AD were often island settlements for solitary hermits, consisting of an oratory with a single cell, sometimes attached, and a well.

The full range of possible components is suggested by the documentary evidence for St Cuthbert's hermitage on Inner Farne, off the Northumberland coast (Figure 1). Bede noted in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed in AD 731) that the area within the enclosure wall was excavated to a lower depth. The quarried material was used to build a dwelling with an oratory, and a room for general domestic purposes. The structure was roofed with timber and straw. There was a landing stage with well and hospice. The settlement was supported by a small area of cultivated ground.
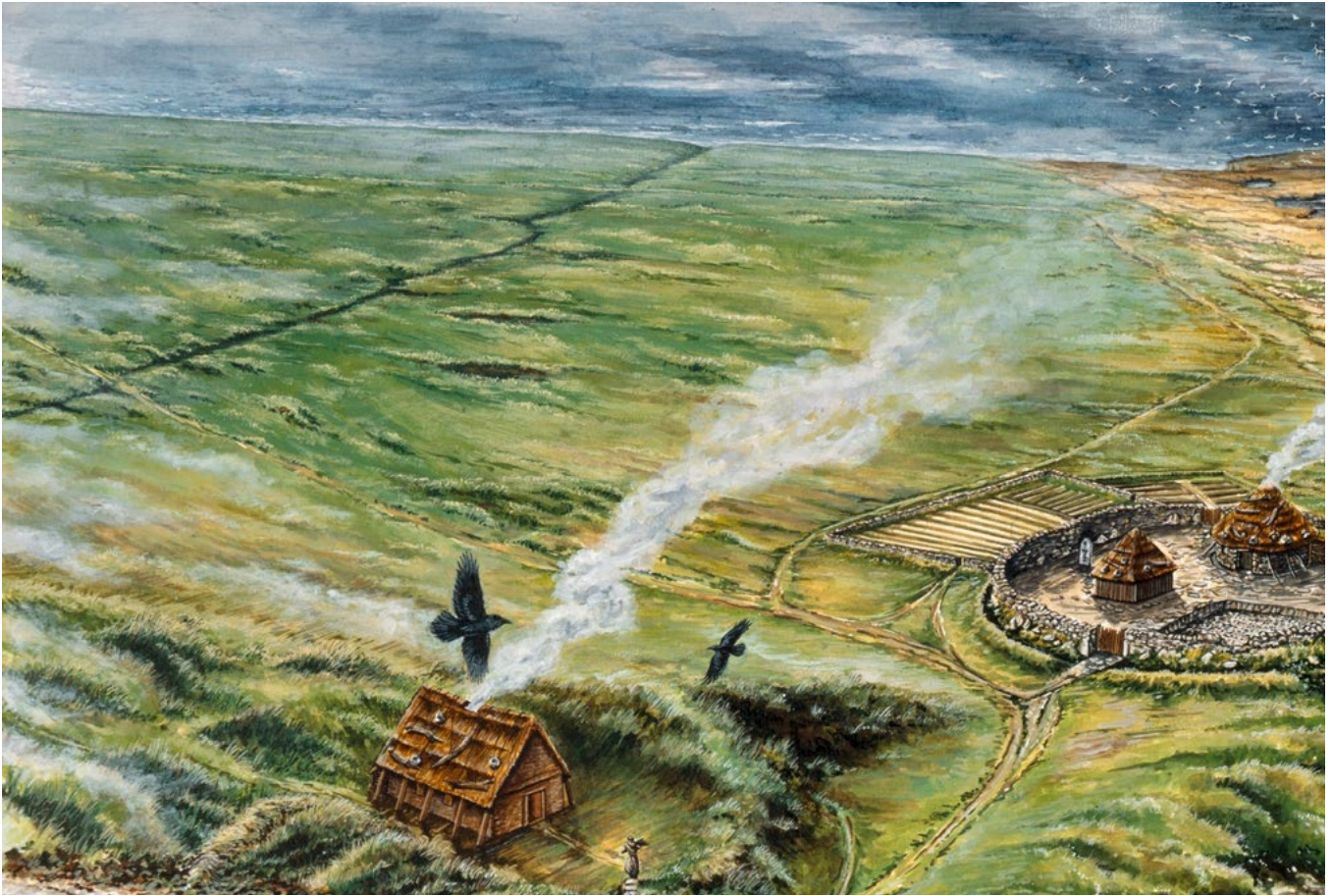
Figure 1
Reconstruction of St Cuthbert's hermitage on Inner Farne, Northumberland around AD 686. Early hermitages were often island settlements for solitary hermits, consisting of an oratory with a single cell or hut for accommodation. Few of these early hermitages survive and where they do they have been altered or rebuilt many times by successive occupants. Nothing remains of St Cuthbert's hermitage, but the island continued to be used as a retreat until the 16th century. Inner Farne is a National Trust property and can be visited by boat.

The author of the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* (completed in AD 721), added that the enclosure wall was constructed of stone and earth, and that a latrine was built outside over the cliff edge. Similar settlements were constructed on islands set within inland lakes and fens. Few of these early hermitages have left any trace, and where they do they have been altered or rebuilt many times by successive occupants. These sites were not always permanently occupied, and may have been retreat houses for early bishops.

Later medieval solitary hermits needed similar remote locations and facilities (for example Coquet Island, Northumberland). A few examples of these have been archaeologically excavated revealing the basic form of the structures (chapel and cell) but little in the way of finds indicating the way of life. These hermitages may have been enclosed by walls, banks, dykes or moats, features that may now be lost due to natural erosion or later agricultural activity.

Cave Hermitages

The same basic requirements were sought by cave hermits. Their dwellings, however, adapted natural features or were excavated into hillsides: for example Bridgnorth (Shropshire) and Pontefract (West Yorkshire). Some cave hermitages are associated with a renowned individual hermit: for example, Guy's Cliffe (near Warwick), and Robert's Cave (Knaresborough, Figure 2), which are associated with the 10th century hermit Guy of Warwick, and with Robert Flower, who died

in 1218. The latter site is described in the early 15th century Life of St Robert, and was built on a two-stage platform above the River Nidd cut out of the limestone bedrock.

Figure 2
St Robert's Cave Hermitage, Knaresborough, North Yorkshire. Stairs cut into the cliff face lead down to the hermitage cave. The cave entrance can be seen on the left. On the rock cut ledge in front of the cave mouth are the remains of a chapel. St Robert's Cave is cut into the limestone cliff face above the River Nidd on the outskirts of Knaresborough and is open to the public.
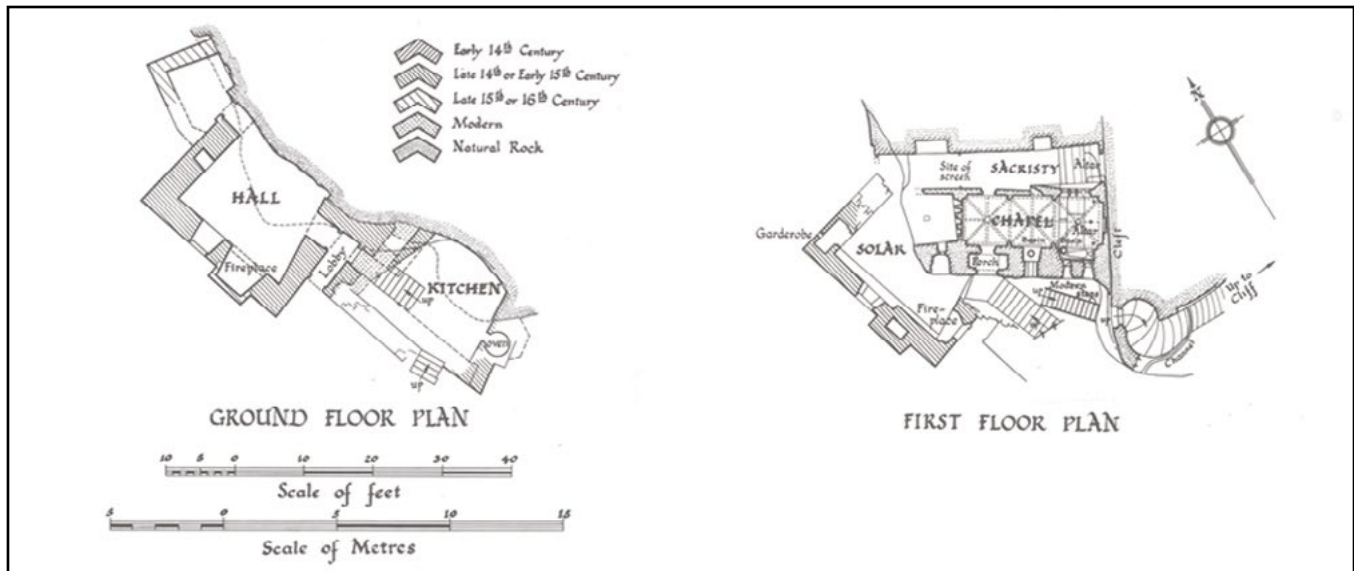
Figure 3
Site plan of the Hermitage, Warkworth, Northumberland. The plan shows how elaborate this structure is with a combination of rock-cut chambers and attached masonry buildings designed to accommodate a solitary hermit. In the chapel, the ribs of a vault, column capitals and shafts have all been carved from the living rock. Warkworth Hermitage is on the north bank of the River Coquet south of Warkworth Castle. It is an English Heritage property open to the public.

Later cave hermitages incorporated a number of chambers and passages, sometimes suggesting a communal or chantry function, the latter relating to the saying of masses for the soul of a deceased patron. They were more highly decorated, often with carved architectural features: for example Oxton (near Exeter) and Redstone (Worcestershire) where the chapel contains an altar and is decorated with wall-paintings. The most elaborate of these is Warkworth Hermitage (Northumberland, Figure 3) which developed from an oratory and single cell into a fairly sophisticated building carved out of the rock.

Communal Hermitages

As an early form of communal monasticism, hermitages prospered in the 7th century especially in Ireland, Scotland, northern England, Wales and Cornwall. These were isolated settlements where inmates lived in separate cells. Then, between AD 1000 and 1150 a revival of eremitic monasticism took place, in which groups of 'New Hermits' concerned with reforming communal life banded together, rather than living completely alone.

In 1073-1074 three monks of Evesham (Aldwin, Reinfrid and Aelfwig) left their house to recreate the early northern monasticism described by Bede. In this 'northern revival' they re-established Jarrow (Tyne & Wear), Whitby (North Yorkshire), Durham (County Durham), Fountains (North Yorkshire), Kirkstead (Lincolnshire), and Kirkstall (West Yorkshire). These groups of new hermits sought marginal sites, reflecting their desire to return to a more austere way of life. However, the success of these communities attracted a large following and wealthy patrons, which lead to their eventual adoption of regular monastic rule and the inevitable transformation of the hermitage to a monastery.

Often the original hermitage structures are sealed beneath later monastic buildings as at Fountains Abbey (North Yorkshire) where recent archaeological excavations revealed two timber buildings beneath the later south transept. As such, hermits sometimes led the way for later Cistercian foundations.

Later medieval communal hermitages are generally contained within an enclosure. The perimeter wall at St Helens (Isles of Scilly)
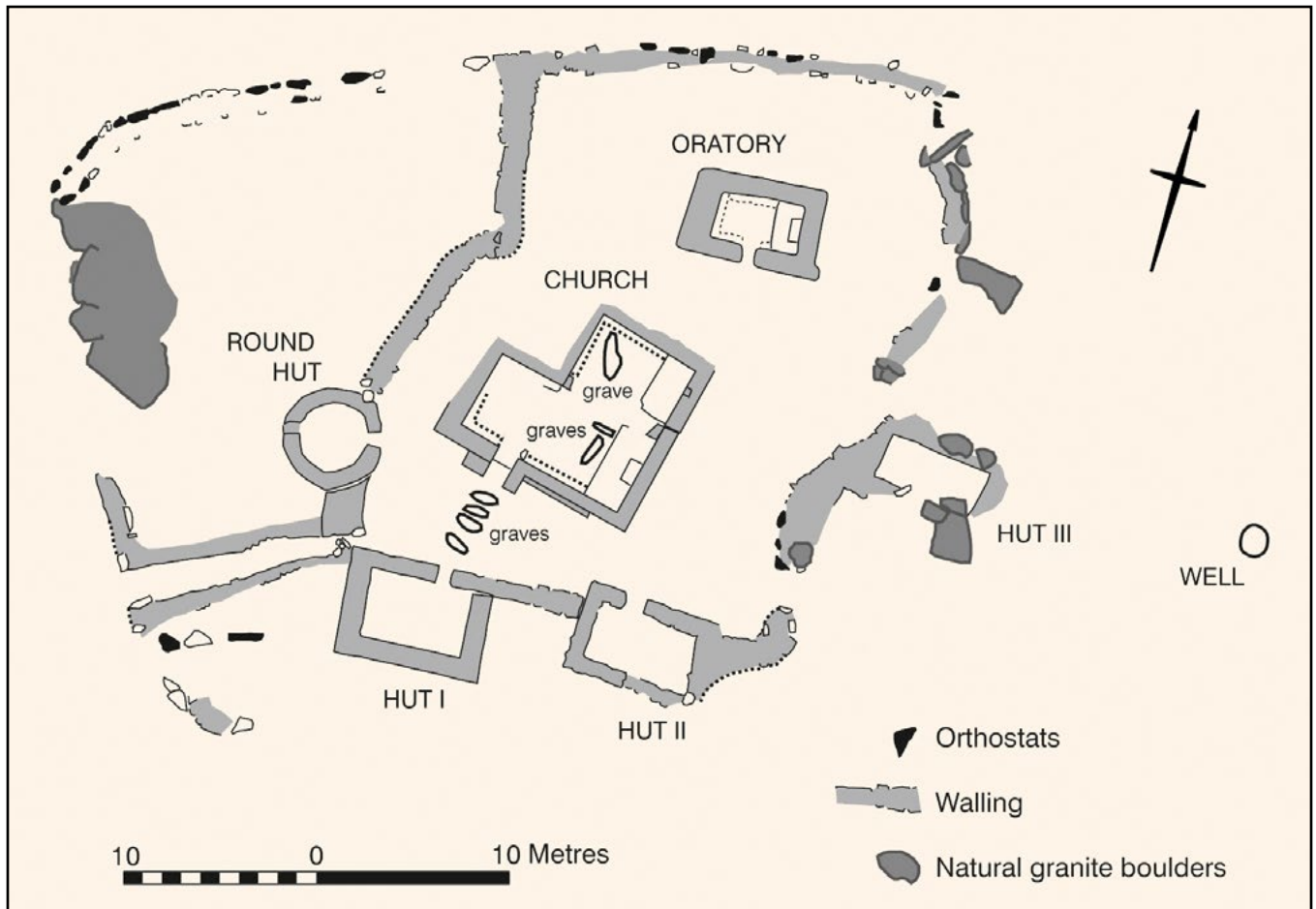
Figure 4
Site plan of St Helen's, Isles of Scilly. The plan shows a series of individual stone structures and enclosure wall. Archaeological excavations suggest that the site developed from a solitary site, with a single round hut and oratory, to a communal hermitage with a number of rectangular huts, for individual accommodation, surrounding the church and oratory buildings. St Helen's is one of 150 islands that form the Isles of Scilly, an archipelago off the south-west coast of England. It is an uninhabited island, but the remains of the hermitage can be visited by boat.

enclosed an area 48.7 m x 33.5 m (Figure 4). St Helens evolved from a solitary hermit site with an oratory and round hut, into a communal hermitage. A rectangular chapel was built to the north of a level courtyard. Around the perimeter wall were small self-contained rectangular stone huts, suggesting that inmates lived individually. In contrast, communal facilities were provided at Bodsey House (Ramsey, Huntingdonshire). There, a stone building had a chapel added to its south end, and a kitchen to its north end.

Larger communal hermitages may have been arranged more like standard monastic plans. Grafton Regis (Northamptonshire, Figure 5) is the only excavated example of this type. Here a cloister was surrounded by buildings to the

south by a church and a square structure, which could have served as a sacristy (where sacred vessels and vestments would be kept), cell or chapel. Both the church and adjoining structure contained burials. Two domestic ranges flanked the north and east sides of the cloister (refectory and dormitory) some of which were two-storey structures. To the west of the cloister was a complex of kitchen and agricultural buildings which housed ovens, drying kilns and a brewing vat. To the south, and parallel with the church, were the fragmentary remains of a parallel structure or courtyard. To the south-west of the cloister is a rectangular building which may have functioned as a guest house. Beyond the enclosure were the foundations of a round building, which may have been a dovecote.
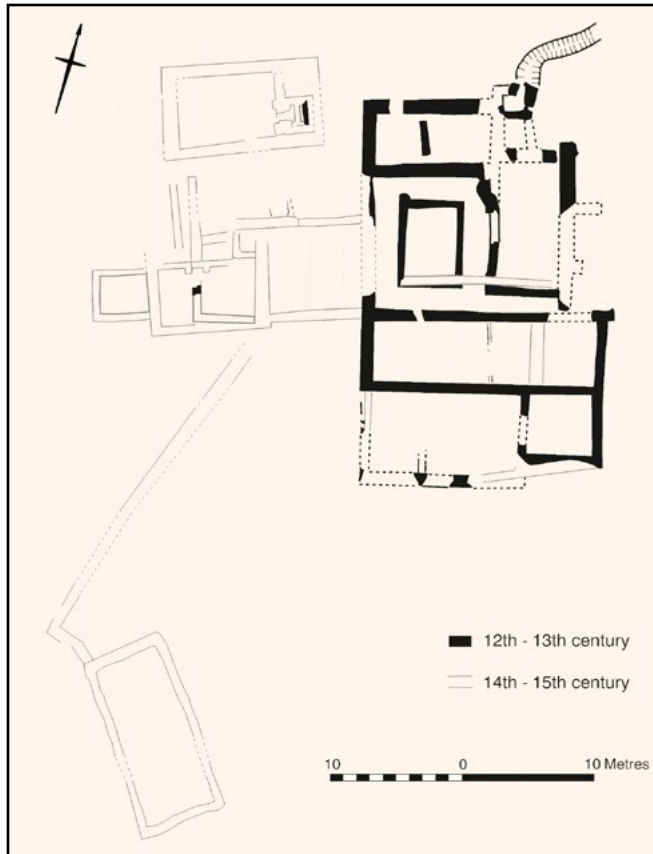
Figure 5
Site plan of Grafton Regis, Northamptonshire. The plan was revealed during archaeological excavations and shows a number of rectangular structures, including a chapel, domestic quarters and service buildings, arranged around a cloister or courtyard. This type of arrangement suggests a communal, monastic occupation of the site rather than an individual or solitary one.

Chantry Hermitages

Although not regularly constituted like chantries attached to churches there are examples where hermits were given benefactions and bequests in return for soul-masses. In 1354, for instance, Edward the Black Prince granted 16s 8d together with an annual stipend of 50s to Sir William Pruit, a priest, to live in the hermitage in Restormel (Cornwall) and recite masses for the souls of the Prince's ancestors.

Lighthouse Hermitages

Lighthouse hermitages are necessarily located on clifftops and promontories and include the usual oratory with cell and a tower where a light was kept burning to warn mariners. There are number of sites that may have served this purpose: for example St Edmunds Point (Hunstanton, Norfolk) and Coquet Island (Northumberland), as well as Chapel Carn Brea in west Cornwall.

Town Hermits

The last group of solitaries, urban hermits, are evidenced in later 14th century bequests (for example from London) although principally occurring in the 15th and early 16th centuries.

These individuals were less concerned with isolation than with performing public service, and were responsible for the repair of bridges and highways, travelling the vicinity begging for repair funds. They remained active until the maintenance of roads became a municipal concern in the 16th century.

Town hermits occupied ready-made structures, generally around town walls and gates, but sometimes attached to parish churches or even located near mills. They have been recorded, for instance, at London, Shrewsbury, Durham, Leicester, Ely, Colchester, Canterbury, Chichester, Bristol, Pontefract, and Norwich, where they occupied chambers over the town gates.

4 Subsequent History

The Reformation brought about the end of the hermitage. Hermitages in monastic control were confiscated at the Dissolution (1536-1540; houses which remained in secular control may have fallen into disuse earlier). Chantry hermitages survived until the dissolution of chantries (1547). Bridge and road chapels served by hermits may have continued in use slightly longer. Later, in the mid-18th century, there was a craze for installing hermitages and hermits (human, clockwork or waxen) as incidents in designed landscapes: Stourhead, Stowe and Badminton are among the well-known examples.

5 Associations

Hermitages have a large number of possible associations. Early hermitages were isolated. Even in the 7th century AD, monasteries may have held eremitic retreats. Where they were available natural caves may have been used for this purpose. Cave hermitages will often have been previously occupied. Torbryan (Devon) contained flint flakes, possibly ranging in date from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Neolithic.

Hermitages were often re-built on places of earlier religious significance (for example Inner Farne, Northumberland). Early hermitages sometimes developed into shrines, which in turn evolved into priories. Example of this transition include St Robert's Cave, Knaresborough (North Yorkshire, Figure 2), and Godric's Hermitage at Finchale (County Durham, Figure 6).

Communal hermitages generally adopted a monastic rule and as a consequence their buildings are often sealed by subsequent monastic phases, for example Fountains (North Yorkshire) and Kirkstall (West Yorkshire). Occasionally monasteries were founded on abandoned hermitage sites, in an attempt to invoke an eremitic tradition (for example, Barnwell Priory, Cambridgeshire). More rare was the transition from hermitage to hospital, and finally, to priory. This process is illustrated by Cockersand (Lancashire).

Later medieval hermitages were generally located within a monastic or secular estate. They were sometimes associated with parish churches or bridge chapels. Hermits were often linked with hospitals, occasionally their dwellings adjoined a hospital chapel. Some were extensions of chantry chapels, or developed into them. A possible example of this development is Warkworth Hermitage (Northumberland). Hermits who followed the rule of St Paul located themselves on roads, near ferries, and at city gates.

Hermitages were fluid establishments, overlapping with hospices, hospitals, monasteries, nunneries, bridge and chantry chapels and monastic retreats. Occasionally other structures acted as hermitages including disused parish churches.

Figure 6
Finchale Priory in County Durham showing the ruined quire of the 13th century church looking east. The outline of the earlier 12th century stone chapel can be seen in the grass within the quire of the later church. This is all that is left of the chapel of St John Baptist erected during the occupation of the site by the solitary hermit St Goderic. Finchale Priory is between Durham and Chester-le-Street in woodland on the River Wear. It is an English Heritage property open to the public.

6 Further Reading

General background and syntheses include R M Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (1914); R Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism* (1994); R Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (1989); and C Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (1971).

Detailed reports on key sites mentioned in the text include: R Cramp, 'Monastic Sites' in D M Wilson (ed), *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (1976), 201-52; R Gilyard-Beer and G Coppack, 'Excavations at Fountains Abbey 1979-80: The Early Development of the Monastery', *Archaeologia* 108 (1986), 147-88; H E O'Neil, 'Excavations of a Celtic Hermitage on St Helens, Isles of Scilly 1956-8', *Archaeological Journal* 121 (1964), 40-69; G Parker 'The Medieval Hermitage of Grafton Regis', *Northamptonshire Past and Present* VI.5 (1982), 247-52; H Summerson, *Warkworth Castle* (1995); F E Zeuner 'Excavations at the site called "the Old Grotto", Torbryan', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 92 (1960), 311-30

7 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

North Region
37 Tanner Row
York
YO1 6WP
Tel: 01904 601948
Fax: 01904 601999

East Region
Brooklands
24 Brooklands Avenue
Cambridge
CB2 8BU
Tel: 01223 582749
Fax: 01223 582701

South Region
4th Floor
Cannon Bridge House
25 Dowgate Hill
London
EC4R 2YA
Tel: 020 7973 3700
Fax: 020 7973 3001

West Region
29 Queen Square
Bristol
BS1 4ND
Tel: 0117 975 1308
Fax: 0117 975 0701

8 Acknowledgments

Historic England

We are the public body that helps people care for, enjoy and celebrate England's spectacular historic environment.

Please contact
guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk
with any questions about this document.

HistoricEngland.org.uk

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact our customer services department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607
Email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk

All information and weblinks accurate at the time of publication.